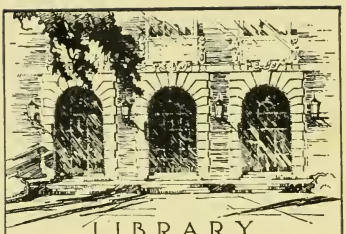

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WHITELADIES.

VOL. I.

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WHITELADIES

By Mrs. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF "CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD," "THREE BROTHERS," ETC. ETC.

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WHITELADIES.

CHAPTER I.

IT was an old manor-house, not a deserted convent, as you might suppose by the name. The conventual buildings from which no doubt the place had taken its name, had dropped away bit by bit, leaving nothing but one wall of the chapel, now closely veiled and mantled with ivy, behind the orchard, about a quarter of a mile from the house. The lands were Church lands, but the house was a lay house, of an older date than the family who had inhabited it from Henry VIII.'s time, when the priory was destroyed, and its possessions transferred to the manor. No one could tell very clearly how this transfer was made, or how the family of Austins came into being. Before that period no trace of them was to be found. They sprang up all at once, not rising

gradually into power, but appearing full-blown as proprietors of the manor, and possessors of all the confiscated lands. There was a tradition in the family of some wild tragical union of an emancipated nun with a secularised friar—a kind of repetition of Luther and his Catherine, but with results less comfortable than those which followed the marriage of those German souls. With the English convertites the issue was not happy, as the story goes. Their broken vows haunted them; their possessions, which were not theirs, but the Church's, lay heavy on their consciences; and they died early, leaving descendants with whose history a thread of perpetual misfortune was woven. The family history ran in a succession of long minorities, the line of inheritance gliding from one branch to the other, the direct thread breaking constantly. To die young, and leave orphan children behind; or to die younger still, letting the line drop and fall back upon cadets of the house, was the usual fate of the Austins of Whiteladies—unfortunate people who bore the traces of their original sin in their very name.

Miss Susan Austin was, at the moment when this story begins, seated in the porch of the manor, on a blazing day of July, when every scrap of shade was grateful and

pleasant, and when the deep coolness of the old-fashioned porch was a kind of paradise. It was a very fine old house, half brick, half timber; the eaves of the high gables carved into oaken lacework; the lattice casements shining out of velvet clothing of ivy; and the great projecting window of the old hall, stepping out upon the velvet lawn, all glass from roof to ground, with only one richly-carved strip of panelling to frame it into the peaked roof. The door stood wide open, showing a long passage floored with red bricks, one wall of which was all casement, the other broken by carved and comely oaken doors, three or four centuries old. The porch was a little wider than the passage, and had a mullioned window in it, by the side of the great front opening, all clustered over with climbing roses. Looking out from the red-floored passage, the eye went past Miss Susan in the porch to the sweet, luxuriant greenness of the lime-trees on the farther side of the lawn, which ended the prospect. The lawn was velvet green; the trees were silken soft, and laden with blossoms; the roses fluttered in at the open porch window, and crept about the door. Every beam in the long passage, every door, the continuous line of casement, the many turns by which this corridor led, meandering, with wealth of cool and airy

space, towards the house, were all centuries old, bearing the stamp of distant generations upon the carved wood and endless windings; but without, everything was young and sunny—grass and daisies and lime-blossoms, bees humming, birds twittering, the roses waving up and down in the soft wind. I wish the figure of Miss Susan had belonged to this part of the landscape; but, alas! historical accuracy forbids romancing. She was the virtual mistress of the house, in absence of a better; but she was not young, nor had she been so for many a long day.

Miss Susan was about sixty, a comely woman of her age, with the fair hair and blue eyes of the Austins. Her hair was so light that it did not turn grey; and her eyes, though there were wrinkles round them, still preserved a certain innocence and candour of aspect which, ill-natured people said, had helped Miss Susan to make many a hard bargain, so guileless was their aspect. She was dressed in a grey gown of woollen stuff (alpaca, I think, for it is best to be particular); her hair was still abundant, and she had no cap on it, or any covering. In her day the adoption of a cap had meant the acceptation of old age, and Miss Susan had no intention of accepting that necessity a moment before she was obliged to do so. The sun, which had begun to turn westward,

had been blazing into the drawing-room, which looked that way, and Miss Susan had been driven out of her own chair and her own corner by it—an unwarrantable piece of presumption. She had been obliged to fly before it, and she had taken refuge in the porch, which faced to the north, and where shelter was to be found. She had her knitting in her hands; but if her countenance gave any clue to her mind's occupation, something more important than knitting occupied her thoughts. She sat on the bench which stood on the deepest side between the inner and the outer entrance, knitting silently, the air breathing soft about her, the roses rustling. For a long time she did not once raise her head. The gardener was plodding about his work outside, now and then crossing the lawn with heavy, leisurely foot, muffled by the velvet of the old immemorial turf. Within there would now and then come an indistinct sound of voice or movement through the long passage; but nothing was visible, except the still grey figure in the shade of the deep porch.

By-and-by, however, this silence was broken. First came a maid, young and rosy, carrying a basket, and lighting up the old passage with a gleam of lightness and youthful colour.

"Where are you going, Jane?" said Miss Susan.

"To the almshouses, please," said Jane, passing out with a curtsey.

After her came another woman, at ten minutes' interval, older and staider, in trim bonnet and shawl, with a large carpet bag.

"Where are you going, Martha?" said the lady again.

"Please, ma'am, to the almshouses," said Martha.

Miss Susan shrugged her shoulders slightly, but said no more.

A few minutes of silence passed, and then a heavy foot, slow and solemn, which seemed to come in procession from a vast distance, echoing over miles of passage, advanced gradually, with a protestation in every footfall. It was the butler, Stevens, a portly personage, with a countenance somewhat flushed with care and discontent.

"Where are you going, Stevens?" said Miss Susan.

"I'm going where I don't want to go, mum," said Stevens, "and where I don't hold with; and, if I might make so bold as to say so, where you ought to put a stop to, if so be as you don't want to be ruinated and done for—you and Miss Augustine, and all the house."

"'Ruinated' is a capital word," said Miss Susan

blandly, "very forcible and expressive; but, Stevens, I don't think we'll come to that yet awhile."

"Going on like this is as good a way as any," grumbled the man; "encouraging an idle set of good-for-nothings to eat up ladies as takes that turn. I've seen it afore, Miss Austin. You gets imposed upon, right hand and left hand; and as for doing good!—No, no, this ain't the way."

Stevens, too, had a basket to carry, and the afternoon was hot and the sun blazing. Between the manor and the almshouses there lay a long stretch of hot road, without any shade to speak of. He had reason, perhaps, to grumble over his unwilling share in these liberal charities. Miss Susan shrugged her shoulders again, this time with a low laugh at the butler's perturbation, and went on with her knitting. In a few minutes another step became audible, coming along the passage —a soft step, with a little hesitation in it—every fifth or sixth footfall having a slight pause or shuffle which came in a kind of rhythm. Then a tall figure came round the corner, relieved against the old carved doorway at the end and the bright redness of the brick floor; a tall, very slight woman, peculiarly dressed in a long limp gown, of still lighter grey than the one Miss

Susan wore, which hung closely about her, with long hanging sleeves hanging half-way down the skirt of her dress, and something like a large hood depending from her shoulders. As the day was so warm, she had not drawn this hood over her head, but wore a light black gauze scarf, covering her light hair. She was not much younger than her sister, but her hair was still lighter, having some half visible mixture of grey, which whitened its tone. Her eyes were blue, but pale, with none of the warmth in them of Miss Susan's. She carried her head a little on one side, and, in short, she was like nothing in the world so much as a mediæval saint out of a painted window, of the period when painted glass was pale in colour, and did not blaze in blues and rubies. She had a basket too, carried in both her hands, which came out of the long falling lines of her sleeves with a curious effect. Miss Augustine's basket, however, was full of flowers—roses, and some long white stalks of lilies, not quite over, though it was July, and long branches of jasmine covered with white stars.

"So you are going to the almshouses too?" said her sister. "I think we shall soon have to go and live there ourselves, as Stevens says, if this is how you are going on."

"Ah, Susan, that would indeed be the right thing to do, if you could make up your mind to it," said her sister, in a low, soft, plaintive voice, "and let the Church have her own again. Then perhaps our sacrifice, dear, might take away the curse."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Miss Susan. "I don't believe in curses. But, Austine, my dear, everybody tells me you are doing a great deal too much."

"Can one do too much for God's poor?"

"If we were sure of that now," said Miss Susan, shaking her head; "but some of them, I am afraid, belong to—the other person. However, I won't have you crossed; but, Austine, you might show a little moderation. You have carried off Jane and Martha and Stevens: if any one comes, who is to open the door?"

"The doors are all open, and you are here," said Miss Augustine calmly. "You would not have the poor suffer for such a trifle? But I hope you will have no visitors to disturb your thoughts. I have been meditating much this morning upon that passage, 'Behold, our days are as a weaver's shuttle.' Think of it, dear. We have got much, much to do, Susan, to make up for the sins of our family."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Miss Susan again; but she said

it half playfully, with tones more gentle than her decided expression of face would have prophesied. "Go away to your charities," she added. "If you do harm, you do it in a good way, and mean well, poor soul, God knows; so I hope no mischief will come of it. But send me Stevens home as soon as may be, Austine, for the sake of my possible meditations, if for nothing else; for there's nobody left in the house but old Martin and the boy and the women in the kitchen."

"What should we want with so many servants?" said Miss Augustine with a sigh; and she walked slowly out of the porch, under the rose-wreaths, and across the lawn, the sun blazing upon her light dress, and turning it into white, and beating fiercely on her uncovered head.

"Take a parasol, for heaven's sake," said Miss Susan; but the white figure glided on, taking no notice. The elder sister paused for a moment in her knitting, and looked after the other with that look, half tender, half provoked, with which we all contemplate the vagaries of those whom we love but do not sympathize with, and whose pursuits are folly to us. Miss Susan possessed what is called "strong sense," but she was not intolerant, as people of strong sense so often are; at least she was

not intolerant to her sister, who was the creature most unlike her, and whom she loved best in the world.

The manor-house did not belong to the Miss Austins, but they had lived in it all their lives. Their family history was not a bright one, as I have said; and their own immediate portion of the family had not fared better than the previous generations. They had one brother who had gone into the diplomatic service, and had married abroad and died young, before the death of their father, leaving two children, a boy and a girl, who had been partially brought up with the aunts. Their mother was a French-woman, and had married a second time. The two children, Herbert and Reine, had passed half of their time with her, half with their father's sisters; for Miss Susan had been appointed their guardian by their father, who had a high opinion of her powers. I do not know that this mode of education was very good for the young people; but Herbert was one of those gentle boys predestined to a short life, who take little harm by spoiling. He was dying now at one-and-twenty, among the Swiss hills, whither he had been taken, when the weather grew hot, from one of the invalid refuges on the Mediterranean shore. He was perishing slowly, and all false hope was over, and everybody knew

it—a hard fate enough for his family; but there were other things involved which made it harder still. The estate of Whiteladies was strictly entailed. Miss Susan and Miss Augustine Austin had been well provided for by a rich mother, but their French sister-in-law had no money and another family, and Reine had no right to the lands, or to anything but a very humble portion left to her by her father; and the old ladies had the prospect before them of being turned out of the house they loved, the house they had been born in, as soon as their nephew's feeble existence should terminate. The supposed heir-at-law was a gentleman in the neighbourhood, distantly related, and deeply obnoxious to them. I say the supposed heir—for there was a break in the Austin pedigree, upon which, at the present time, the Miss Austins and all their friends dwelt with exceeding insistance. Two or three generations before, the second son of the family had quarrelled with his father, and disappeared entirely from England. If he had any descendants, they, and not Mr. Farrel-Austin, were the direct heirs. Miss Susan had sent envoys over all the known world seeking for these problematical descendants of her grand-uncle Everard. Another young Austin, of a still more distant stock, called Everard too, and holding a place

in the succession after Mr. Farrel-Austin, had gone to America even, on the track of some vague Austins there, who were not the people he sought; and though Miss Susan would not give up the pursuit, yet her hopes were getting feeble; and there seemed no likely escape from the dire necessity of giving up the manor, and the importance (which she did not dislike) of the position it gave her as virtual mistress of a historical house, to a man she disliked and despised, the moment poor Herbert's breath should be out of his body. Peaceful, therefore, as the scene had looked before the interruptions above recorded, Miss Susan was not happy, nor were her thoughts of a cheerful character. She loved her nephew, and the approaching end to which all his relations had long looked forward hung over her like a cloud, with that dull sense of pain, soon to become more acute, which impending misfortune, utterly beyond our power to avert, so often brings; and mingled with this were the sharper anxieties and annoyances of the quest she had undertaken, and its ill success up to this moment; and the increasing probability that the man she disliked, and no other, must be her successor, her supplanter in her home. Her mind was full of such thoughts; but she was a woman used to restrain her personal sentiments, and

keep them to herself, having been during her long life much alone, and without any companion in whom she was accustomed to confide. The two sisters had never been separated in their lives; but Augustine, not Susan, was the one who disclosed her feelings and sought for sympathy. In most relations of life there is one passive and one active, one who seeks and one who gives. Miss Augustine was the weaker of the two, but in this respect she was the most prominent. She was always the first to claim attention, to seek the interest of the other; and for years long her elder sister had been glad to give what she asked, and to keep silent about her own sentiments, which the other might not have entered into. "What was the use?" Miss Susan said to herself; and shrugged her shoulders and kept her troubles, which were very different from Augustine's, in her own breast.

How pleasant it was out there in the porch! the branches of the lime-trees blown about softly by the wind; a daisy here and there lifting its roguish, saucy head, which somehow had escaped the scythe, from the close-mown lawn; the long garlands of roses playing about the stone mullions of the window, curling round the carved lintel of the door; the cool passage on the other side leading into the house, with its red floor and carved doors, and long range

of casement. Miss Susan scarcely lifted her eyes from her knitting, but every detail of the peaceful scene was visible before her. No wonder—she had learned them all by heart in the quiet, long progress of the years. She knew every twig on the limes, every bud on the roses. She sat still, scarcely moving, knitting in with her thread many an anxious thought, many a wandering fancy, but with a face serene enough, and all about her still. It had never been her habit to betray what was in her to an unappreciative world.

She brightened up a little, however, and raised her head, when she heard the distant sound of a whistle coming far off through the melodious summer air. It caught her attention, and she raised her head for a second, and a smile came over her face. "It must be Everard," she said to herself, and listened, and made certain, as the air, a pretty, gay French air, became more distinct. No one else would whistle that tune. It was one of Reine's French songs—one of those graceful little melodies which are so easy to catch and so effective. Miss Susan was pleased that he should whistle one of Reine's tunes. She had her plans and theories on this point, as may be hereafter shown; and Everard besides was a favourite of her own, independent of Reine. Her

countenance relaxed, her knitting felt lighter in her hand, as the whistle came nearer, and then the sound of a firm light step. Miss Susan let the smile dwell upon her face, not dismissing it, and knitted on, expecting calmly till he should make his appearance. He had come to make his report to her of another journey, from which he had just returned, in search of the lost Austins. It had not been at all to his own interest to pursue this search, for, failing Mr. Farrel-Austin, he himself would be the heir-at-law; but Everard, as Miss Susan had often said to herself, was not the sort of person to think of his own advantage. He was, if anything, too easy on that head—too careless of what happened to himself individually. He was an orphan with a small income—that "just enough" which is so fatal an inheritance for a young man—nominally at "the bar," actually nowhere in the race of life, but very ready to do anything for anybody, and specially for his old cousins, who had been good to him in his youth. He had a small house of his own on the river not far off, which the foolish young man lived in only for a few weeks now and then, but which he refused to let, for no reason but because it had been his mother's, and her memory (he thought) inhabited the place. Miss Susan was so provoked with this and other follies

that she could have beaten Everard often, and then hugged him—a mingling of feelings not unusual. But as Everard is just about to appear in his own person, I need not describe him further. His whistle came along, advancing through the air, the pleasantest prelude to his appearance. Something gay and free and sweet was in the sound, the unconscious self-accompaniment of a light heart. He whistled as he went for want of thought—nay, not for want of thought, but because all the movements of his young soul were as yet harmonious, lightsome, full of hope and sweetness; his gay personality required expression; he was too light-hearted, too much at home in the world, and friendly, to come silent along the sunshiny way. So, as he could not talk to the trees and the air, like a poetical hero in a tragedy, Everard made known his good-will to everything, and delicious passive happiness, by his whistle; and he whistled like a lark, clear and sweet: it was one of his accomplishments. He whistled Miss Susan's old airs when she played them on her old piano, in charming time and harmony; and he did not save his breath for drawing-room performances, but sent before him these pleasant intimations of his coming, as far as a mile off. To which Miss Susan sat and listened, waiting for his arrival, with a smile on her face.

CHAPTER II.

"I HAVE been waiting for you these fifteen minutes," she said.

"What—you knew I was coming?"

"I heard you, boy. If you choose to whistle 'Ce que je désire' through St. Austin's parish, you may make up your mind to be recognised. Ah! you make me think of my poor children, the one dying, the other nursing him——"

"Don't!" said the young man, holding up his hand, "it is heart-breaking; I dare not think of them, for my part. Aunt Susan, the missing Austins are not to be found in Cornwall. I went to Bude, as you told me, and found a respectable grocer, who came from Berks, to be sure, and knew very little about his grandfather, but is not our man. I traced him back to Flitton, where he comes from, and found out his pedigree. I have broken down entirely. Did you know that the Farrel-Austins were at it too?"

"At what?"

"This search after our missing kinsfolk. They have just come back, and they look very important; I don't know if they have found out anything."

"Then you have been visiting them?" said Miss Susan, bending her head over her knitting, with a scarcely audible sigh; it would have been inaudible to a stranger, but Everard knew what it meant.

"I called—to ask if they had got back, that was all," he said, with a slight movement of impatience; "and they have come back. They had come down the Rhine and by the old Belgian towns, and were full of pictures, and cathedrals, and so forth. But I thought I caught a gleam in old Farrel's eye."

"I wonder—but if he had found them out I don't think there would be much of a gleam in his eye," said Miss Susan. "Everard, my dear, if we have to give up the house to them, what shall I do? and my poor Austine will feel it still more."

"If it has to be done, it must be done, I suppose," said Everard, with a shrug of his shoulders, "but we need not think of it till we are obliged; and besides, Aunt Susan, forgive me, if you had to give it up to—poor Herbert himself, you would feel it; and

if he should get better, poor fellow, and live, and marry——"

"Ah, my poor boy," said Miss Susan, "life and marriage are not for him!" She paused a moment and dried her eyes, and gulped down a sob in her throat. "But you may be right," she said in a low tone, "perhaps, whoever our successors were, we should feel it—even you, Everard."

"You should never go out of Whiteladies for me," said the young man, "*that* you may be sure of; but I shall not have the chance. Farrel-Austin, for the sake of spiting the family generally, will make a point of outliving us all. There is this good in it, however," he added, with a slight movement of his head, which looked like throwing off a disagreeable impression, and a laugh, "if poor Herbert, or I, supposing such a thing possible: had taken possession, it might have troubled your affection for us, Aunt Susan. Nay, don't shake your head. In spite of yourself, it would have affected you. You would have felt it bitter, unnatural, that the boys you had brought up and fostered should take your house from you. You would have struggled against the feeling, but you could not have helped it, I know."

"Yes; a great deal you know about an old woman's feelings," said Miss Susan, with a smile.

"And as for these unknown people, who never heard of Whiteladies, perhaps, and might pull down the old house, or play tricks with it—for instance, your grocer at Bude, the best of men, with a charming respectable family, a pretty daughter, who is a dressmaker, and a son who has charge of the cheese and butter—— After all, Aunt Susan, you could not in your heart prefer them even to old Farrel-Austin, who is a gentleman at least, and knows the value of the old house."

"I am not so sure of that," said Miss Susan, though she had shivered at the description. "Farrel-Austin is our enemy; he has different ways of thinking, different politics, a different side in everything; and besides—don't laugh in your light way, Everard; everybody does not take things lightly as you do—there is something between him and us, an old grievance that I don't care to speak of now."

"So you have told me," said the young man. "Well, we cannot help it, anyhow; if he must succeed, he must succeed, though I wish it was myself rather, for your sake."

"Not for your own," said Miss Susan, with restrained

sharpness, looking up at him. "The Farrel-Austins are your friends, Everard. Oh yes, I know! nowadays young people do not take up the prejudices of their elders. It is better and wiser, perhaps, to judge for yourself, to take up no foregone conclusion; but for my part, I am old-fashioned, and full of old traditions. I like my friends, somehow, reasonably or unreasonably, to be on my side."

"You have never even told me why it was your side," said Everard, with rising colour; "am I to dislike my relations without even knowing why? That is surely going too far in partizanship. I am not fond of Farrel-Austin himself; but the rest of the family——"

"The—girls; that is what you would say."

"Well, Aunt Susan! the girls if you please; they are very nice girls. Why should I hate them because you hate their father? It is against common sense, not to speak of anything else."

There was a little pause after this. Miss Susan had been momentarily happy in the midst of her cares, when Everard's whistle coming to her over the summer fields and flowers, had brought to her mind a soft thought of her pretty Reine, and of the happiness that might be awaiting her after her trial was over. But now, by

a quick and sudden revulsion, this feeling of relief was succeeded by a sudden realisation of where Reine might be now, and how occupied, such as comes to us all sometimes, when we have dear friends in distress—in one poignant flash, with a pain which concentrates in itself as much suffering as might make days sad. The tears came to her eyes in a gush. She could not have analysed the sensations of disappointment, annoyance, displeasure, which conspired to throw back her mind upon the great grief which was in the background of her landscape, always ready to recall itself; but the reader will understand how it came about. A few big drops of moisture fell upon her knitting. "Oh, my poor children!" she said, "how can I think of anything else, when at this very moment, perhaps, for all one knows——"

I believe Everard felt what was the connecting link of thought, or rather feeling, and for the first moment was half angry, feeling himself more or less blamed; but he was too gentle a soul not to be overwhelmed by the other picture suggested, after the first moment. "Is he so very bad, then?" he asked, after an interval, in a low and reverential tone.

"Not worse than he has been for weeks," said Miss

Susan, "but that is as bad as possible; and any day—any day may bring—— God help us! in this lovely weather, Everard, with everything blooming, everything gay—him dying, her watching him. Oh! how could I forget them for a moment—how could I think of anything else?"

He made no answer at first, then he said faltering: "We can do them no good by thinking, and it is too cruel, too terrible. Is she alone?"

"No; God forgive me," said Miss Susan. "I ought to think of the mother who is with her. They say a mother feels most. I don't know. She has other ties and other children, though I have nothing to say against her. But Reine has no one."

Was it a kind of unconscious appeal to his sympathy? Miss Susan felt in a moment as if she had compromised the absent girl, for whom she herself had formed visions with which Reine had nothing to do.

"Not that Reine is worse off than hundreds of others," she said hastily, "and she will never want friends; but the tie between them is very strong. I do wrong to dwell upon it—and to you!"

"Why to me?" said Everard. He had been annoyed to have Reine's sorrow thrust upon his notice, as if he

had been neglecting her; but he was angry now to be thus thrust away from it, as if he had nothing to do with her; the two irritations were antagonistic, yet the same.

"You don't like painful subjects," said Miss Susan, with a consciousness of punishing him, and vindictive pleasure, good soul as she was, in his punishment. "Let us talk of something else. Austine is at her almshouses, as usual, and she has left me with scarcely a servant in the house. Should any one call, or should tea be wanted, I don't know what I should do."

"I don't suppose I could make the tea," said Everard. He felt that he was punished, and yet he was glad of the change of subject. He was light-hearted, and did not know anything personally of suffering, and he could not bear to think of grief or misfortune which, as he was fond of saying, he could do no good by thinking of. He felt quite sure of himself that he would have been able to overcome his repugnance to things painful had it been "any good," but as it was, why make himself unhappy? He dismissed the pain as much as he could, as long as he could, and felt that he could welcome visitors gladly, even at the risk of making the tea, to turn the conversation from the gloomy aspect it had taken.

The thought of Herbert and Reine seemed to cloud over the sunshine and take the sweetness out of the air. It gave his heart a pang as if it had been suddenly compressed; and this pain, this darkening of the world, could do them no good. Therefore, though he was fond of them both, and would have gone to the end of the world to restore health to his sick cousin, or even to do him a temporary pleasure, yet, being helpless towards them, he was glad to get the thoughts of them out of his mind. It spoilt his comfort, and did them no manner of good. Why should he break his own heart by indulging in such unprofitable thoughts?

Miss Susan knew Everard well; but though she had herself abruptly changed the subject in deference to his wishes, she was vexed with him for accepting the change, and felt her heart fill full of bitterness on Reine's account and poor Herbert's, whom this light-hearted boy endeavoured to forget. She could not speak to him immediately, her heart being sore and angry. He felt this, and had an inkling of the cause, and was half compunctious and half disposed to take the offensive, and ask "What have I done?" and defend himself, but could not, being guilty in heart. So he stood leaning against the open doorway, with a great rose-branch, which had

got loose from its fastenings, blowing in his face, and giving him a careless prick with its thorns, as the wind blew it about. Somehow the long waving bough, with its many roses, which struck him lightly, playfully, across the face as he stood there, with dainty mirth and mischief, made him think of Reine more than Miss Susan's reminder had done. The prick of the branch woke in his heart that same, sudden, vivid, poignant realisation of the gay girl in contrast with her present circumstances, which just a few minutes before had taken Miss Susan, too, by surprise; and thus the two remained, together, yet apart, silent, in a half quarrel, but both thinking of the same subject, and almost with the same thoughts. Just then the rolling of carriage wheels and prancing of horses became audible turning the corner of the green shady road into which the gate, at this side of the town, opened—for the manor-house was not secluded in a park, but opened directly from a shady, sylvan road, which had once served as avenue to the old priory. The greater part of the trees that formed the avenue had perished long ago, but some great stumps and roots and an interrupted line of chance-sown trees showed where it had been. The two people in the porch were roused by this sound, Miss Susan to a troubled recollec-

tion of her servantless condition, and Everard to mingled annoyance and pleasure as he guessed who the visitors were. He would have been thankful to any one who had come in with a new interest to relieve him from the gloomy thoughts that had taken possession of him against his will, and the new-comers, he felt sure, were people whom he liked to meet.

"Here is some one coming to call," cried Miss Susan in dismay, "and there is no one to open the door!"

"The door is open, and you can receive them here, or take them in, which you please; you don't require any servant," said Everard; and then he added, in a low tone, "Aunt Susan, it is the Farrel-Austins; I know their carriage."

"Ah!" cried Miss Susan, drawing herself up. She did not say any more to him—for was not he a friend and supporter of that objectionable family?—but awaited the unwelcome visitors with dignified rigidity. Their visits to her were very rare, but she had always made a point of enduring and returning these visits with that intense politeness of hostility which transcends every other kind of politeness. She would not consent to look up, nor to watch the alighting of the brightly clad figures on the other side of the lawn. The old front of the house,

the old doorway and porch in which Miss Susan sat, was not now the formal entrance, and consequently there was no carriage road to it; so that the visitors came across the lawn with light summer dresses and gay ribbons, flowery creatures against the background of green. They were two handsome girls, prettily dressed and smiling, with their father, a dark, insignificant, small man, coming along like a shadow in their train.

"Oh, how cool and sweet it is here!" said Kate, the eldest. "We are so glad to find you at home, Miss Austin. I think we met your sister about an hour ago going through the village. Is it safe for her to walk in the sun without her bonnet? I should think she would get a sunstroke on such a day."

"She is the best judge," said Miss Susan, growing suddenly red; then, subduing herself as suddenly, "for my part," she said, "I prefer the porch. It is too warm to go out."

"Oh, we have been so much about; we have been abroad," said Sophy, the youngest. "We think nothing of the heat here. English skies and English climate are dreadful after abroad."

"Ah, are they? I don't know much of any other," said Miss Susan. "Good morning, Mr. Farrel. May I

show you the way to the drawing-room, as I happen to be here?"

"Oh, mayn't we go to the hall, please, instead? We are all so fond of the hall," said Sophy. She was the silly one, the one who said things which the others did not like to say. "*Please* let us go there; isn't this the turn to take? Oh, what a dear old house it is, with such funny passages and turnings and windings! If it were ours, I should never sit anywhere but in the hall."

"Sophy!" said the father, in a warning tone.

"Well, papa! I am not saying anything that is wrong. I do love the old hall. Some people say it is such a tumble-down, ramshackle old house; but that is because they have no taste. If it were mine, I should always sit in the hall."

Miss Susan led the way to it without a word. Many people thought that Sophy Farrel-Austin had reason in her madness, and said, with a show of silliness, things that were too disagreeable for the others; but that was a mere guess on the part of the public. The hall was one of the most perfectly preserved rooms of its period. The high, open roof had been ceiled, which was almost the only change made since the fifteenth century, and that had been done in Queen Anne's time; and the huge

open chimney was partially built up : small sacrifices made to comfort by a family too tenacious of their old dwelling-place to do anything to spoil it, even at the risk of asthmas or rheumatism. To tell the truth, however, there was a smaller room, of which the family now made their dining-room on ordinary occasions. Miss Susan, scorning to take any notice of words which she laid up and pondered privately to increase the bitterness of her own private sentiments towards her probable supplanters, led the way into this beautiful old hall. It was wainscoted with dark panelled wood, which shone and glistened, up to within a few feet of the roof, and the interval was filled with a long line of casement, throwing down a light which a painter would have loved upon the high, dark wall. At the upper end of the room was a deep recess, raised a step from the floor, and filled with a great window all the way up to the roof. At the lower end the musicians' gallery of ancient days, with carved front and half-effaced coats-of-arms, was still intact. The rich old Turkey carpet on the floor, the heavy crimson curtains that hung on either side of the recess with its great window, were the most modern things in the room ; and yet they were older than Miss Susan's recollection could carry. The rest of the furniture dated much further back. The fire-place, in which great

logs of wood blazed every winter, was filled with branches of flowering shrubs, and the larger old-fashioned garden flowers, arranged in some huge blue and white China jars, which would have struck any collector with envy. Miss Susan placed her young visitors on an old, straight-backed settle, covered with stamped leather, which was extremely quaint, and very uncomfortable. She took herself one of the heavy-fringed, velvet-covered chairs, and began with deadly civility to talk. Everard placed himself against the carved mantel-piece and the bank of flowers that filled the chimney. The old room was so much the brighter to him for the presence of the girls; he did not care much that Sophy was silly. Their pretty faces and bright looks attracted the young man; perhaps he was not very wise himself. It happens so often enough.

And thus they all sat down and talked—about the beautiful weather, about the superiority, even to this beautiful weather, of the weather "abroad;" of where they had been and what they had seen; of Mrs. Farrel-Austin's health, who was something of an invalid, and rarely came out; and other similar matters, such as are generally discussed in morning calls. Everard helped Miss Susan greatly to keep the conversation up, and carry

off the visit with the ease and lightness that were desirable, but yet I am not sure that she was grateful to him. All through her mind, while she smiled and talked, there kept rising a perpetual contrast. Why were these two so bright and well, while the two children of the old house were in such sad estate?—while they chattered and laughed, what might be happening elsewhere? And Everard, who had been like a brother to Herbert and Reine, laughed too, and chattered, and made himself pleasant to these two girls, and never thought—never thought! This was the sombre under-current which went through Miss Susan's mind while she entertained her callers, not without sundry subdued passages of arms. But Miss Susan's heart beat high, in spite of herself, when Mr. Farrel-Austin lingered behind his daughters, bidding Everard see them to the carriage.

"Cousin Susan, I should like a word with you," he said.

CHAPTER III.

THE girls went out into the old corridor, leaving the great carved door of the dining-hall open behind them. The flutter of their pretty dresses filled the picturesque passage with animation, and the sound of their receding voices kept up this sentiment of life and movement even after they had disappeared. Their father looked after them well-pleased, with that complacence on his countenance, and pleasant sense of personal well-being which is so natural, but so cruel and oppressive to people less well off. Miss Susan, for her part, felt it an absolute insult. It seemed to her that he had come expressly to flaunt before her his own happiness and the health and good looks of his children. She turned her back to the great window, that she might not see them going across the lawn, with Everard in close attendance upon them. A sense of desertion, by him, by happiness, by all that is bright and pleasant in the world, came into her heart, and made her defiant. When such a feeling

as this gets into the soul, all softness, all indulgence to others, all favourable construction of other people's words or ways, departs. They seemed to her to have come to glory over her and over Herbert dying, and Reine mourning, and the failure of the old line. What was grief and misery to her was triumph to them. It was natural perhaps, but very bitter; curses even, if she had not been too good a woman to let them come to utterance, were in poor Miss Susan's heart. If he had said anything to her about his girls, as she expected, if he had talked of them at all, I think the flood must have found vent somehow; but fortunately he did not do this. He waited till they were out of the house, and then rose and closed the door, and reseated himself facing her, with something more serious in his face.

"Excuse me for waiting till they had gone," he said. "I don't want the girls to be mixed up in any family troubles; though, indeed, there is no trouble involved in what I have to tell you—or, at least, so I hope."

The girls were crossing the lawn as he spoke, laughing and talking, saying something about the better training of the roses, and how the place might be improved. Miss Susan caught some words of this with ears quickened by her excited feelings. She drew her chair further from the

window, and turned her back to it more determinedly than ever. Everard, too! he had gone over to the prosperous side.

"My dear cousin," said Mr. Farrel-Austin, "I wish you would not treat me like an enemy. Whenever there is anything I can do for you, I am always glad to do it. I heard that you were making inquiries after our great-uncle Everard and his descendants, if he left any."

"You could not miss hearing it. I made no secret of it," said Miss Susan. "We have put advertisements in the newspapers, and done everything we possibly could to call everybody's attention."

"Yes; I know, I know; but you never consulted me. You never said, 'Cousin, it is for the advantage of all of us to find these people.'"

"I do not think it is for your advantage," said Miss Susan, looking quickly at him.

"You will see, however, that it is, when you know what I have to tell you," he said, rubbing his hands. "I suppose I may take it for granted that you did not mean it for my advantage. Cousin Susan, I have found the people you have been looking for in vain."

The news gave her a shock, and so did his triumphant expression; but she put force upon herself. "I am glad

to hear it," she said. "Such a search as mine is never in vain. When you have advantages to offer, you seldom fail to find the people who have a right to those advantages. I am glad you have been successful."

"And I am happy to hear you say so," said the other. "In short we are in a state of agreement and concord for once in our lives, which is delightful. I hope you will not be disappointed, however, with the result. I found them in Bruges, in a humble position enough. Indeed, it was the name of Austin over a shop-door which attracted my notice first."

He spoke leisurely, and regarded her with a smile which almost drove her furious, especially as, by every possible argument, she was bound to restrain her feelings. She was strong enough, however, to do this, and present a perfectly calm front to her adversary.

"You found the name—over a shop-door?"

"Yes, a drapery shop; and inside there was an old man with the Austin nose as clear as I ever saw it. It belongs, you know, more distinctly to the elder branch than to any other portion of the family."

"The original stock is naturally stronger," said Miss Susan. "When you get down to collaterals, the family type dies out. Your family, for instance, all resemble

your mother, who was a Miss Robinson, I think I have heard?"

This thrust gave her a little consolation in her pain, and it disturbed her antagonist in his triumph. She had, as it were, drawn the first blood.

"Yes, yes; you are quite right," he said; "of a very good family in Essex. Robinsons of Swillwell—well-known people."

"In the city," said Miss Susan, "so I have always heard; and an excellent thing too. Blood may not always make its way, but money does; and to have an alderman for your grandfather is a great deal more comfortable than to have a crusader. But about our cousin at Bruges," she added, recovering her temper. How pleasant to every well-regulated mind is the consciousness of having administered a good, honest, knock-down blow!

Mr. Farrel-Austin glanced at her out of the light grey eyes, which were indisputable Robinsons', and as remote in colour as possible from the deep blue orbs, clear as a winter sky, which were one of the great points of the Austins; but he dared not take any further notice. It was his turn now to restrain himself.

"About our cousin in Bruges," he repeated with an

effort. "He turns out to be an old man, and not so happy in his family as might be wished. His only son was dying—"

"For God's sake!" said Miss Susan, moved beyond her power of control, and indeed ceasing to control herself with this good reason for giving way—"have you no heart that you can say such words with a smile on your face? You that have children yourself, whom God may smite as well as another's! How dare you? how dare you? for your own sake?"

"I don't know that I am saying anything unbecoming," said Mr. Farrel. "I did not mean it. No one can be more grateful for the blessings of Providence than I am. I thank Heaven that all my children are well; but that does not hinder the poor man at Bruges from losing his. Pray, let me continue; his wife and he are old people, and his only son, as I say, was dying or dead—dead by this time, certainly, according to what they said of his condition."

Miss Susan clasped her hands tightly together. It seemed to her that he enjoyed the poignant pang his words gave her — "dead by this time, certainly!" Might that be said of the other who was dearer to her? Two dying, that this man might get the inheritance!

Two lives extinguished, that Farrel-Austin and his girls might have this honour and glory! He had no boys, however. His glory could be but short-lived. There was a kind of fierce satisfaction in that thought.

"I had a long conversation with the old man; indeed we stayed in Bruges for some days on purpose. I saw all his papers, and there can be no doubt he is the grandson of our great-uncle Everard. I explained the whole matter to him, of course, and brought your advertisements under his notice, and explained your motives."

"What are my motives?—according to your explanation."

"Well, my dear cousin—not exactly love and charity to me, are they? I explained the position fully to him."

"Then there is no such thing as justice or right in the world, I suppose," she cried indignantly; "but everything hinges on love to you, or the reverse. You know what reason I have to love you—well do you know it, and lose no opportunity to keep it before me; but if my boy himself—my dying boy, God help me!—had been in your place, Farrel-Austin, should I have let him take possession of what was not his by right? You judge

men, and women too, by yourself. Let that pass, so far as you are concerned. You have no other ground, I suppose, to form a judgment on; but you have no right to poison the minds of others. Nothing will make me submit to that."

"Well, well," said Mr. Farrel-Austin, shrugging his shoulders with contemptuous calm, "you can set yourself right when you please with the Bruges shopkeeper. I will give you his address. But in the meantime you may as well hear what his decision is. At his age he does not care to change his country and his position, and come to England in order to become the master of a tumble-down old house. He prefers his shop, and the place he has lived in all his life. And the short and the long of it is, that he has transferred his rights to me, and resigned all claim upon the property. I agreed to it," he added, raising his head, "to save trouble, more than for any other reason. He is an old man, nearly seventy; his son dead or dying, as I said. So far as I am concerned, it could only have been a few years' delay at the most."

Miss Susan sat bolt upright in her chair, gazing at him with eyes full of amazement—so much astonished that she scarcely comprehended what he said. It was

evidently a relief to the other to have made his announcement. He breathed more freely after he had got it all out. He rose from his chair and went to the window, and nodded to his girls across the lawn. "They are impatient, I see, and I must be going," he went on. Then looking at Miss Susan for the first time, he added, in a tone that had a sound of mockery in it, "You seem surprised."

"Surprised!" She had been leaning towards the chair from which he had risen without realising that he had left it in her great consternation. Now she turned quickly to him. "Surprised! I am a great deal more than surprised."

He laughed; he had the upper hand at last. "Why more?" he said lightly. "I think the man was a very reasonable old man, and saw what his best policy was."

"And you—accepted his sacrifice?" said Miss Susan, amazement taking from her all power of expression;—"you permitted him to give up his birthright? you—took advantage of his ignorance?"

"My dear cousin, you are rude," he said, laughing; "without intending it, I am sure. So well-bred a woman could never make such imputations willingly. Took

advantage! I hope I did not do that. But I certainly recommended the arrangement to him, as the most reasonable thing he could do. Think! At his age, he could come here only to die; and with no son to succeed him, of course I should have stepped in immediately. Few men like to die among strangers. I was willing, of course, to make him a recompense for the convenience —for it was no more than a convenience, make the most you can of it—of succeeding at once."

Miss Susan looked at him speechless with pain and passion. I do not know what she did not feel disposed to say. For a moment her blue eyes shot forth fire, her lips quivered from the flux of too many words which flooded upon her. She began even, faltering, stammering —then came to a stop in the mere physical inability to arrange her words, to say all she wanted, to launch her thunderbolt at his head with the precision she wished. At last she came to a dead stop, looking at him only, incapable of speech; and with that pause came reflection. No; she would say nothing; she would not commit herself; she would think first, and perhaps do, instead of saying. She gave a gasp of self-restraint.

"The young ladies seem impatient for you," she said. "Don't let me detain you. I don't know that I have

anything to say on the subject of your news, which are surprising, to be sure, and take away my breath."

"Yes, I thought you would be surprised," he said, and shook hands with her. How Miss Susan's fingers tingled —how she would have liked, in an outburst of impatience which I fear was very undignified, to apply them to his ear, rather than to suffer his hand to touch hers in hypocritical amity! He was a little disappointed, however, to have had so little response to his communication. Her silence baffled him. He had expected her to commit herself; to storm, perhaps; to dash herself in fury against this skilful obstacle which he had placed in her way. He did not expect her to have so much command of herself; and, in consequence, he went away with a secret uneasiness, feeling less successful and less confident in what he had done, and asking himself, Could he have made some mistake after all—could she know something that made his enterprise unavailing? He was more than usually silent on the drive home, making no answer to the comments of his girls, or to their talk about what they would do when they got possession of the manor.

"I hope the furniture goes with the house," said Kate. "Papa, you must do all you can to secure those old chairs, and especially the settee with the stamped leather, which

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is charming, and would fetch its weight in gold in Wardour Street."

"And, papa, those big blue and white jars," said Sophy, "real old Nankin, I am sure. They must have quantities of things hidden away in those old cupboards. It shall be as good as a museum when we get possession of the house!"

"You had better get possession of the house before you make any plans about it," said her father tartly. "I never like making too sure."

"Why, papa, what has come over you?" cried the eldest. "You were the first to say what you would do, when we started. Miss Susan has been throwing some spell over you."

"If it is her spell, it will not be hard to break it," said Sophy; and thus they glided along, between the green abundant hedges, breathing the honey breath of the limes, but not quite so happy and triumphant as when they came. As for the girls, they had heard no details of the bargain their father had made, and gave no great importance to it; for they knew he was the next heir, and that the manor-house would soon cease to be poor Herbert's, with whom they had played as children, but whom, they said constantly, they scarcely knew.

They did not understand what cloud had come over their father. "Miss Susan is an old witch," they said, "and she has put him under some spell."

Meanwhile Miss Susan sat half-stupefied where he had left her, in a draught, which was a thing she took precautions against on ordinary occasions — the great window open behind her, the door open in front of her, and the current blowing about even the sedate and heavy folds of the great crimson curtains, and waking, though she did not yet feel it, the demon Neuralgia to twist her nerves, and set her frame on edge. She did not seem able to move or even think, so great was the amazement in her mind. Could he be right—could he have found the Austin she had sought for over all the world; and was it possible that the unrighteous bargain he told her of had really been completed? Unrighteous! for was it not cheating her in the way she felt most, deceiving her in her expectations? An actual misfortune could scarcely have given Miss Susan so great a shock. She sat quite motionless, her very thoughts arrested in their course, not knowing what to think, what to do—how to take this curious new event. Must she accept it as a thing beyond her power of altering, or ought she to ignore it as something incredible, impossible? One

thing or other she must decide upon at once; but in the meantime, so great was the effect this intimation had upon her mind, that she felt herself past all power of thinking. Everard, coming back, found her still seated there in the draught in the old hall. He shut the door softly behind him and went in, looking at her with questioning eyes. But she did not notice his looks; she was too much and too deeply occupied in her own mind. Besides, his friendship with her visitors made Everard a kind of suspected person, not to be fully trusted. Miss Susan was too deeply absorbed to think this, but she felt it. He sat down opposite, where Mr. Farrel-Austin had been sitting, and looked at her; but this mute questioning produced no response.

"What has old Farrel been saying to you, Aunt Susan?" he asked at last.

"Why do you call him old Farrel, Everard? he is not nearly so old as I am," said Miss Susan with a sigh, waking up from her thoughts. "Growing old has its advantages, no doubt, when one can realise the idea of getting rid of all one's worries, and having the jangled bells put in tune again; but otherwise—to think of others who will set everything wrong coming after us, who have tried hard to keep them right! Perhaps, when it comes to

the very end, one does not mind; I hope so; I feel sore now to think that this man should be younger than I am, and likely to live ever so much longer, and enjoy my father's house."

Everard sat still saying nothing. He was unprepared for this sort of reply. He was slightly shocked too, as young people so often are, by the expression of any sentiments, except the orthodox ones, on the subject of dying. It seemed to him, at twenty-five, that to Miss Susan at sixty it must be a matter of comparatively little consequence how much longer she lived. He would have felt the sentiments of the *Nunc Dimittis* to be much more appropriate and correct in the circumstances; he could not understand the peculiar mortification of having less time to live than Farrel-Austin. He looked grave with the fine disapproval and lofty superiority of youth. But he was a very gentle-souled and tender-hearted young man, and he did not like to express the disapproval that was in his face.

"We had better not talk of them," said Miss Susan, after a pause; "we don't agree about them, and it is not likely we should; and I don't want to quarrel with you, Everard, on their account. Farrel thinks he is quite sure of the estate now. He has found out some

one whom he calls our missing cousin, and has got him to give up in his own favour."

"Got him to give up in his own favour!" repeated Everard amazed. "Why, this is wonderful news. Who is it, and where is he, and how has it come about? You take away one's breath."

"I cannot go into the story," said Miss Susan. "Ask himself. I am sick of the subject. He thinks he has settled it, and that it is all right; and waits for nothing but my poor boy's end to take possession. They had not even the grace to ask for him!" she cried, rising hastily. "Don't ask me anything about it; it is more than I can bear."

"But, Aunt Susan——"

"I tell you we shall quarrel, Everard, if we talk more on this subject," she cried. "You are their friend, and I am their—no; it is they who are my enemies," she added, stopping herself. "I don't dictate to you how you are to feel, or what friends you are to make. I have no right; but I have a right to talk of what I please, and to be silent when I please. I shall say no more about it. As for you," she said, after another pause, with a forced smile, "the young ladies will consult with you what changes they are to make in the house. I

heard them commenting on the roses, and how everything could be improved. You will be of the greatest use to them in their new arrangements, when all obstacles are removed."

"I don't think it is kind to speak to me so," said Everard, in his surprise. "It is not generous, Aunt Susan. It is like kicking a fellow when he is down; for you know I can't defend myself."

"Yes, I suppose it is unjust," said Miss Susan, drying her eyes, which were full of hot tears, with no gratefulness of relief in them. "The worst of this world is that one is driven to be unjust and can't help it, even to those one loves."

CHAPTER IV.

EVERARD AUSTIN remained at Whiteladies for the rest of the afternoon—he was like one of the children of the house. The old servants took him aside and asked him to mention things to Miss Susan with which they did not like to worry her in her trouble though indeed most of these delicacies were very much after date, and concerned matters on which Miss Susan had already been sufficiently worried. The gardener came and told him of trees that wanted cutting, and the bailiff on the farm consulted him about the labourers for the approaching harvest. "Miss Susan don't like tramps, and I don't want not to go against her, just when things is at the worst. I shouldn't wonder, sir," said the man, looking curiously in Everard's face, "if things was in other hands this time next year?" Everard answered him with something of the bitterness which he himself had condemned so much a little while before.

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That Farrel-Austin should succeed was natural; but thus to look forward to the changing of masters gave him, too, a pang. He went indoors somewhat disturbed, and fell into the hands of Martha and Jane fresh from the almshouses. Martha, who was Miss Susan's maid and half-housekeeper, had taken charge of him often enough in his boyish days, and called him Master Everard still, so that she was entitled to speak; while the younger maid looked on, and concurred. "It will break *my* lady's heart," said Martha, "leaving of this old house; not but what we might be a deal more comfortable in a nice handy place, in good repair like yours is, Master Everard; where the floors is straight and the roofs likewise, and you don't catch a rheumatism round every corner; but *my* lady ain't of my way of thinking. I tell her as it would have been just as bad if Mr. Herbert had got well, poor dear young gentleman, and got married; but she won't listen to me. Miss Augustine, she don't take on about the house; but she's got plenty to bother her, poor soul; and the way she do carry on about them almshouses! It's like a born natural, that's what it is, and nothing else. Oh me! I know as I didn't ought to say it; but what can you do, I ask you, Master Everard, when you've got the like of

that under your very nose? She'll soon have nothing but paupers in the parish if she has her way."

"She's very feeling-hearted," said Jane, who stood behind her elder companion and put in a word now and then over Martha's shoulder. She had been enjoying the delights of patronage, the happiness of recommending her friends in the village to Miss Augustine's consideration; and this was too pleasant a privilege to be consistent with criticism. The profusion of her mistress's alms made Jane feel herself to be "feeling-hearted" too.

"And great thanks she gets for it all," said Martha "They call her the crazy one down in the village. Miss Susan, she's the hard one; and Miss Augustine's the crazy one. That's gratitude! trailing about in her grey gown for all the world like a Papist nun. But, poor soul, I didn't ought to grudge her her grey, Master Everard. We'll soon be black and black enough in our mourning, from all that I hear."

Again Everard was conscious of a shiver. He made a hasty answer and withdrew from the women who had come up to him in one of the airy corridors up-stairs, half glass, like the passages below, and full of corners. Everard was on his way from a pilgrimage to the room,

in which, when Herbert and he were children, they had been allowed to accumulate their playthings and possessions. It had a bit of corridor, like a glazed gallery, leading to it—and a door opened from it to the musicians' gallery of the hall. The impulse which led him to this place was not like his usual care to avoid unpleasant sensations, for the very sight of the long bare room, with its windows half choked with ivy, the traces of old delights on the walls—bows hung on one side, whips on the other—a heap of cricket bats and pads in a corner; and old books, pictures, and rubbish heaped upon the old creaky piano on which Reine used to play to them, had gone to his heart. How often the old walls had rung with their voices, the old floor creaked under them! He had given one look in to the haunted solitude, and then had fled, feeling himself unable to bear it. "As if I could do them any good thinking!" Everard had said to himself with a rush of tears to his eyes—and it was in the gallery leading to this room—the west gallery as everybody called it—that the women stopped him. The rooms at Whiteladies had almost every one a gallery, or an anteroom, or a little separate staircase to itself. The dinner-bell pealed out as he emerged from thence and hurried to the room which

had been always called his, to prepare for dinner. How full of memories the old place was! The dinner-bell was very solemn, like the bell of a cathedral, and had never been known to be silent, except when the family were absent, for more years than any one could reckon. How well he recollected the stir it made among them all as children, and how they would steal into the musicians' gallery and watch in the centre of the great room below, in the speck of light which shone amid its dimness, the two ladies sitting at table, like people in a book or in a dream, the servants moving softly about, and no one aware of the unseen spectators, till the irrepressible whispering and rustling of the children betrayed them! How sometimes they were sent away ignominiously, and sometimes Aunt Susan, in a cheery mood, would throw up oranges to them, which Reine, with her tiny hands, could never catch! How she used to cry when the oranges fell round her and were snapped up by the boys—not for the fruit, for Reine never had anything without sharing it or giving it away, but for the failure which made them laugh at her! Everard laughed unawares as the scene came up before him, and then felt that sudden compression, constriction of his heart—*serrement du cœur*, which forces

out the bitterest tears. And then he hurried down to dinner and took his seat with the ladies, in the cool of the summer evening, in the same historical spot, having now become one of them, and no longer a spectator. But he looked up at the gallery with a wistful sense of the little scuffle that used to be there, the scrambling of small feet, and whispering of voices. In summer, when coolness was an advantage, the ladies still dined in the great hall.

"Austine, you have not seen Everard since he returned from America," said Miss Susan. "How strong and well he is looking!"—here she gave a little sigh; not that she grudged Everard his good looks, but the very words brought the other before her, at thought of whom every other young man's strength and health seemed almost cruel.

"He has escaped the fate of the family," said Miss Augustine. "All I can pray for, Everard, is that you may never be the Austin of Whiteladies. No wealth can make up for that."

"Hush, hush!" said Miss Susan with a smile, "these are your fancies. We are not worse off than many other families who have no such curse as you think of, my dear. What were you doing at your almshouses?

Are all the old women comfortable—and grumbling? What were you about to-day?"

"I met them in chapel," said the younger sister, "and talked to them. I told them, as I always do, what need we have of their prayers; and that they should maintain a Christian life. Ah, Susan, you smile; and Everard, because he is young and foolish, would laugh if he could; but when you think that this is all I can do, or any one can do, to make up for the sins of the past, to avert the doom of the family——"

"If we have anything to make up more than others, I think we should do it ourselves," said Miss Susan. "But never mind, dear, if it pleases you. You are spoiling the people; but there are not many villages spoiled with kindness. I comfort myself with that."

"It is not to please myself that I toil night and day, that I rise up early and lie down late," said Miss Augustine, with a faint gleam of indignation in her blue eyes. Then she looked at Everard and sighed. She did not want to brag of her mortifications. In the curious balance-sheet which she kept with heaven, poor soul—so many prayers and vigils and charities, against so many sinful generations past, so many family failings in duty—she was aware that anything like a boast on

her part diminished the value of the compensation she was rendering. Her unexpressed rule was that the, so to speak, commercial worth of a good deed disappeared, when advantage was taken of it for this world; she wanted to keep it at its full value for the next, and therefore she stopped short and said no more. "Some of them put us to shame," she said; "they lead such holy lives. Old Mary Matthews spends nearly her whole time in chapel. She lives only for God and us. To hear her speak would reward you for many sacrifices, Susan—if you ever make any. She gives up all—her time, her comfort, her whole thoughts—for us."

"Why for us?" said Everard. "Do you keep people on purpose to pray for the family, Aunt Augustine? I beg your pardon, but it sounded something like it. You can't mean it, of course?"

"Why should not I mean it? We do not pray so much as we ought for ourselves," said Miss Augustine; "and if I can persuade holy persons to pray for us continually——"

"At so much a week, a cottage, and coals and candles," said Miss Susan. "Augustine, my dear, you shall have your way as long as I can get it for you. I am glad the old souls are comfortable; and if they are good, so

much the better; and I am glad you like it, my dear; but whatever you think, you should not talk in this way. Eh, Stevens, what do you say?"

"If I might make so bold, ma'am," said the butler, "not to go again Miss Augustine; but that hold Missis Matthews, mum, she's a hold——"

"Silence, sir," said Miss Susan promptly, "I don't want to hear any gossip; my sister knows best. Tell Everard about your schools, my dear; the parish must be the better of the schools. Whatever the immediate motive is, so long as the thing is good," said this casuist, "and whatever the occasional result may be, so long as the meaning is charitable—— There, there, Everard, I won't have her crossed."

This was said hastily in an undertone to Everard, who was shaking his head, with a suppressed laugh on his face.

"I am not objecting to anything that is done, but to your reasoning, which is defective," he said.

"Oh, my reasoning! is that all? I don't stand upon my reasoning," said Miss Susan. And then there was a pause in the conversation, for Miss Susan's mind was perturbed, and she talked but in fits and starts, having sudden intervals of silence, from which she would as

suddenly emerge into animated discussion, then be still again all in a moment. Miss Augustine, in her long limp grey dress, with pale hands coming out of the wide hanging sleeves, talked only on one subject, and did not eat at all, so that her company was not very cheerful. And Everard could not but glance up now and then to the gallery, which lay in deep shade, and feel as if he were in a dream, seated down below in the light. How vividly the childish past had come upon him; and how much more cheerful it had been in those old days, when the three atoms in the dusty corner of the gallery looked down with laughing eyes upon the solemn people at table, and whispered and rustled in their restlessness till they were found out!

At last—and this was something so wonderful that even the servants who waited at table were appalled—Miss Augustine recommenced the conversation. "You have had some one here to-day," she said. "Farrel-Austin—I met him."

"Yes!" said Miss Susan, breathless and alarmed.

"It seemed to me that the shadow had fallen upon them already. He is grey and changed. I have not seen him for a long time; his wife is ill, and his children are delicate."

"Nonsense, Austine, the girls are as strong and well as a couple of hoydens need be." Miss Susan spoke almost sharply, and in a half-frightened tone.

"You think so, Susan; for my part I saw the shadow plainly. It is that their time is drawing near to inherit. Perhaps as they are girls, nothing will happen to them; nothing ever happened to us; that is to say, they will not marry probably; they will be as we have been. I wish to know them, Susan. Probably one of them would take up my work, and endeavour to keep further trouble from the house."

"Farrel's daughter? You are very good, Austine, very good; you put me to shame," said Miss Susan, bending her head.

"Yes; why not Farrel's daughter? She is a woman like the rest of us, and an Austin, like the rest of us. I wish the property could pass to women, then there might be an end of it once for all."

"In that case it would go to Reine, and there would not in the least be an end of it; quite the reverse."

"I could persuade Reine," said Miss Augustine. "Ah, yes; I could persuade *her*. She knows my life. She knows about the family, how we have all suffered. Reine would be led by me; she would give it up, as I should

have done had I the power. But men will not do such a thing. I am not blaming them. I am saying what is the fact. Reine would have given it up."

"You speak like a visionary," said Miss Susan sighing. "Yes, I dare say Reine would be capable of a piece of folly, or you, or even myself. We do things that seem right to us at the moment without taking other things into consideration, when we are quite free to do what we like. But don't you see, my dear, a man with an entailed estate is not free? His son or his heir must come after him, as his father went before him; he is only a kind of tenant. Farrel, since you have spoken of Farrel—I would not have begun it—dare not alienate the property from Everard; and Everard, when it comes to him, must keep it for his son, if he ever has one."

"The thing would be," said Miss Augustine, "to make up your mind never to have one, Everard." She looked at him calmly and gravely, crossing her hands within her long sleeves.

"But, my dear Aunt Augustine," said Everard laughing, "what good would that do me? I should have to hand it on to the next in the entail all the same. I could not do away with the estate without the consent of my heir at least."

"Then I will tell you what to do," said Miss Augustine. "Marry; it is different from what I said just now, but it has the same meaning. Marry at once; and when you have a boy let him be sent to me. I will train him, I will show him his duty; and then with his consent, which he will be sure to give when he grows up, you can break the entail and restore Whiteladies to its right owner. Do this, my dear boy, it is quite simple; and so at last I shall have the satisfaction of feeling that the curse will be ended one day. Yes; the thing to be done is this."

Miss Susan had exclaimed in various tones of impatience. She had laughed reluctantly when Everard laughed; but what her sister said was more serious to her than it was to the young man. "Do you mean to live for ever," she said at last, "that you calculate so calmly on bringing up Everard's son?"

"I am fifty-five," said Miss Augustine, "and Everard might have a son in a year. Probably I shall live to seventy-five, at least—most of the women of our family do. He would then be twenty, approaching his majority. There is nothing extravagant in it; and on the whole, it seems to me the most hopeful thing to do. You must marry, Everard, without delay; and if you want money

I will help you. I will do anything for an object so near my heart."

"You had better settle whom I am to marry, Aunt Augustine."

Everard's laughter made the old walls gay. He entered into the joke without any *arrière-pensée;* the suggestion amused him beyond measure; all the more that it was made with so much gravity and solemnity. Miss Susan had laughed too; but now she became slightly alarmed, and watched her sister with troubled eyes.

"Whom you are to marry? That wants consideration," said Miss Augustine. "The sacrifice would be more complete and satisfying if two branches of the family concurred in making it. The proper person for you to marry in the circumstances would be, either——"

"Austine!"

"Yes! I am giving the subject my best attention. You cannot understand, no one can understand, how all-important it is to me. Everard—either one of Farrel's girls, to whom I bear no malice, or perhaps Reine."

"Austine, you are out of your senses on this point," said Miss Susan, almost springing from her seat and

disturbing suddenly the calm of the talk. "Come, come, we must retire; we have dined. Everard, if you choose to sit a little, Stevens is giving you some very good claret. It was my father's; I can answer for it, much better than I can answer for my own, for I am no judge. You will find us in the west room when you are ready, or in the garden. It is almost too sweet to be indoors to-night."

She drew her sister's arm within hers and led her away, with a peremptory authority which permitted no argument, and to which Augustine instinctively yielded; and Everard remained alone, his cheek tingling, his heart beating. It had all been pure amusement up to this point; but even his sense of the ludicrous could not carry him further. He might have known, he said to himself, that this was what she must say. He blushed, and felt it ungenerous in himself to have allowed her to go so far, to propose these names to him. He seemed to be making the girls endure a humiliation against his will, and without their knowledge. What had they done that he should permit any one even to suggest that he could choose among them? This was the more elevated side of his feelings; but there was another side, I am obliged to allow, a fluttered, flattered consciousness that the

suggestion might be true; that he might have it in his power, like a sultan, to choose among them, and throw his princely handkerchief at the one he preferred. A mixture therefore of some curious sense of elation and suppressed pleasure, mingled with the more generous feeling within him, quenching at once the ridicule of Miss Augustine's proposal, and the sense of wrong done to those three girls. Yes, no doubt, it is a man's privilege to choose; he, and not the woman, has it in his power to weigh the qualities of one and another, and to decide which would be most fit for the glorious position of his wife. They could not choose him, but he could choose one of them, and on his choice probably their future fate would depend. It was impossible not to feel a little pleasant flutter of consciousness. He was not vain, but he felt the sweetness of the superiority involved, the greatness of the position. When the ladies were gone Everard laughed, all alone by himself, he could not help it; and the echoes took up the laughter, and rang into that special corner of the gallery which he knew so well, centring there. Why there, of all places in the world? Was it some ghost of little Reine in her childhood that laughed? Reine in her childhood had been the one who exercised choice. It was she who might

have thrown the handkerchief, not Everard. And then a hush came over him, and a compunction, as he thought where Reine was at this moment, and how she might be occupied. Bending over her brother's death-bed, hearing his last words, her heart contracted with the bitter pang of parting; while her old playfellow laughed, and wondered whether he should choose her out of the three to share his grandeur. Everard grew quite silent all at once, and poured himself out a glass of the old claret in deep humiliation and stillness, feeling ashamed of himself. He held the wine up to the light with the solemnest countenance, trying to take himself in, and persuade himself that he had no lighter thoughts in his mind, and then, having swallowed it with equal solemnity, he got up and strolled out in the garden. He had so grave a face when Miss Susan met him, that she thought for the first moment that some letter had come and that all was over, and gasped and called to him, what was it? what was it? "Nothing!" said Everard more solemn than ever. He was impervious to any attempt at laughter for the rest of the evening, ashamed of himself and his light thoughts, in sudden contrast with the thoughts that must be occupying his cousins, his old playmates. Aan yet, as he went home in the moonlight, the shock of

that contrast lessened, and his young lightness of mind began to reassert itself. Before he got out of hearing of the manor he began to whistle again unawares; but this time it was not one of Reine's songs. It was a light opera air which, no doubt, one of the other girls had taught him; or so at least Miss Susan thought.

CHAPTER V.

IN all relationships, as I have already said—and it is not an original saying—there is one who is active and one who is passive—"l'un qui baise et l'autre qui tend la joue," as the French say, with their wonderful half-pathetic, half-cynic wisdom. Between the two sisters of Whiteladies it was Augustine who gave the cheek and Susan the kiss, it was Augustine who claimed and Susan who offered sympathy; it was Augustine's affairs, such as they were, which were discussed. The younger sister had only her own fancies and imaginations, her charities, and the fantastic compensation which she thought she was making for the evil deeds of her family, to discuss and enlarge upon; whereas the elder had her mind full of those mundane matters from which all our cares spring—the management of material interests—the conflict which is always more or less involved in the government of other souls. She managed her nephew's estate in trust for him till he came of age—if he should

live to come of age, poor boy; she managed her own money and her sister's, which was not inconsiderable; and the house and the servants, and in some degree the parish, of which Miss Susan was the virtual Squire. But of all this weight of affairs it did not occur to her to throw any upon Augustine. Augustine had always been spared from her youth up—spared all annoyance, all trouble, everybody uniting to shield her. She had been "delicate" in her childhood, and she had sustained a "disappointment" in youth—which means in grosser words that she had been jilted, openly and disgracefully, by Farrel-Austin, her cousin, which was the ground of Susan Austin's enmity to him. I doubt much whether Augustine herself, whose blood was always tepid and her head involved in dreams, felt this half so much as her family felt it for her—her sister especially, to whom she had been a pet and plaything all her life, and who had that half-adoring admiration for her which an elder sister is sometimes seen to entertain for a younger one whom she believes to be gifted with that beauty which she knows has not fallen to her share. Susan felt the blow with an acute sense of shame and wounded pride, which Augustine herself was entirely incapable of—and from that moment forward had constituted herself, not only

the protector of her sister's weakness, but the representative of something better which had failed her, of that admiration and chivalrous service which a beautiful woman is supposed to receive from the world. It may seem a strange thing to many to call the devotion of one woman to another chivalrous. Yet Susan's devotion to her sister merited the title. She vowed to herself that, so far as she could prevent it, her sister should never feel the failure of those attentions which her lover ought to have given her—that she should never know what it was to fall into that neglect which is often the portion of middle-aged women — that she should be petted and cared for, as if she were still the favourite child or the adored wife which she had been or might have been. In doing this Susan not only testified the depth of her love for Augustine and indignant compassion for her wrongs, but also a woman's high ideal of how an ideal woman should be treated in this world. Augustine was neither a beautiful woman nor an ideal one, though her sister thought so, and Susan had been checked many a time in her idolatry by her idol's total want of comprehension of it; but she had never given up her plan for consoling the sufferer. She had admired Augustine as well as loved her; she had always found what she did

excellent; she had made Augustine's plans important by believing in them, and her opinions weighty, even while, within herself, she saw the plans to be impracticable and the opinions futile. The elder sister would pause in the midst of a hundred real and pressing occupations, a hundred weighty cares, to condole with, or to assist, or support, the younger, pulling her through some parish imbroglio, some almshouse squabble, as if these trifling annoyances had been affairs of state. But of the serious matters which occupied her own mind she said nothing to Augustine, knowing that she would find no comprehension, and willing to avoid the certainty that her sister would take no interest in her proceedings. Indeed it was quite possible that Augustine might have gone further than mere failure of sympathy; Susan knew very well that she would be disapproved of, perhaps censured, for being engrossed by the affairs of this world. The village people, and everybody on the estate, were, I think, of the same opinion. They thought Miss Susan "the hard one"—doing her ineffable injustice, one of those unconsidered wrongs that cut into the heart. At first, I suppose, this had not been the state of affairs—between the sisters, at least; but it would be difficult to tell how many disappointments the strong

and hard Susan had gone through before she made up her mind never to ask for the sympathy which never came her way. This was her best philosophy, and saved her much mortification; but it cost her many trials before she could make up her mind to it, and had not its origin in philosophy at all, but in much wounding and lacerating of a generous and sensitive heart.

Therefore she did not breathe a word to her sister about the present annoyance and anxiety in her mind. When it was their hour to go up-stairs—and everything was done like clockwork at Whiteladies—she went with Augustine to her room, as she always did, and heard over again for the third or fourth time her complaint of the rudeness of the butler, Stevens, who did not countenance Augustine's "ways."

"Indeed, he is a very honest fellow," said Miss Susan, thinking bitterly of Farrel-Austin and of the last successful stroke he had made.

"He is a savage, he is a barbarian—he cannot be a Christian," Miss Augustine had replied.

"Yes, yes, my dear; we must take care not to judge other people. I will scold him well, and he will never venture to say anything disagreeable to you again."

"You think I am speaking for myself," said Augus-

tine. "No; what I feel is, how out of place such a man is in a household like ours. You are deceived about him now, and think his honesty, as you call it, covers all his faults. But, Susan, listen to me. Without the Christian life, what is honesty? Do you think *it* would bear the strain if temptation — to any great crime, for instance——"

"My dear, you are speaking nonsense," said Miss Susan.

"That is what I am afraid of," said her sister solemnly. "A man like this ought not to be in a house like ours; for you are a Christian, Susan?"

"I hope so, at least," said the other with a momentary laugh.

"But why should you laugh? Oh, Susan! think how you throw back my work—even, you hinder my atonement. Is not this how all the family have been—treating everything lightly—our family sin and doom, like the rest? And you, who ought to know better, who ought to strengthen my hands! perhaps, who knows, if you could but have given your mind to it, we two together might have averted the doom!"

Augustine sat down in the large hard wooden chair which she used by way of mortification, and covered her face with her hands. Susan, who was standing by

holding her candle, looked at her strangely with a half smile, and a curious acute sense of the contrast between them. She stood silent for a moment, perhaps with a passing wonder which of the two it was who had done most for the old house; but if she entertained this thought, it was but for the moment. She laid her hand upon her sister's shoulder.

"My dear Austine," she said, "I am Martha and you are Mary. So long as Martha did not find fault with her sister, our good Lord made no objection to her housewifely ways. So, if I am earthly while you are heavenly, you must put up with me, dear; for, after all, there are a great many earthly things to be looked after. And as for Stevens, I shall scold him well," she added with sudden energy, with a little outburst of natural indignation at the cause (though innocent) of this slight ruffling of the domestic calm. The thoughts in her mind were of a curious and mixed description as she went along the corridor after Augustine had melted, and bestowed, with a certain lofty and melancholy regret for her sister's imperfections, her good-night kiss. Miss Susan's room was on the other side of the house, over the drawing-room. To reach it she had to go along the corridor, which skirted the staircase with its dark oaken

balustrades, and thence into another casemented passage, which led by three or four oaken steps to the ante-room in which her maid slept, and from which her own room opened. One of her windows looked out upon the north side, the same aspect as the dining-hall, and was, indeed, the large casement which occupied one of the richly-carved gables on that side of the house. The other looked out upon the west side, over the garden, and facing the sunset. It was a large panelled room, with few curtains, for Miss Susan loved air. A shaded night-lamp burned faintly upon a set of carved oaken drawers at the north end, and the moonlight slanting through the western window threw two white lights, broken by the black bar of the casement, on the broad oak boards—for only the centre of the room was carpeted. Martha came in with her mistress, somewhat sleepy, and slightly injured in her feelings, for what with Everard's visits and the other agitations of the day, Miss Susan was half an hour late. It is not to be supposed that she, who could not confide in her sister, would confide in Martha; but yet Martha knew, by various indications, what Augustine would never have discovered, that Miss Susan had "something on her mind." Perhaps it was because she did not talk as much as usual,

and listened to Martha's own remarks with the indifference of abstractedness; perhaps because of the little tap of her foot on the floor, and sound of her voice as she asked her faithful attendant if she had done yet, while Martha, aggrieved but conscientious, fumbled with the doors of the wardrobe, in which she had just hung up her mistress's gown; perhaps it was the tired way in which Miss Susan leaned back in her easy-chair, and the half sigh which breathed into her good night. But from all these signs together Martha knew, what nothing could have taught Augustine. But what could the maid do to show her sympathy? At first, I am sorry to say, she did not feel much, but was rather glad that the mistress, who had kept her half an hour longer than usual out of bed, should herself have some part of the penalty to pay; but compunctions grew upon Martha before she left the room, and I think that her lingering, which annoyed Miss Susan, was partly meant to show that she felt for her mistress. If so, it met the usual recompense of unappreciated kindness, and at last earned a peremptory dismissal for the lingerer. When Miss Susan was alone, she raised herself a little from her chair and screwed up the flame of the small silver lamp on her little table, and put the double eyeglass

which she used, being slightly short-sighted, on to her nose. She was going to think; and she had an idea, not uncommon to short-sighted people, that to see distinctly helped her faculties in everything. She felt instinctively for her eyeglass when any noise woke her in the middle of the night; she could hear better as well as think better with that aid. The two white streaks of moonlight, with the broad bar of shadow between, and all the markings of the diamond panes, indicated on the grey oaken boards and fringe of Turkey carpet, moved slowly along the floor, coming further into the room as the moon moved westward to its setting. In the distant corner the night-light burned dim but steady. Miss Susan sat by the side of her bed, which was hung at the head with blue-grey curtains of beautiful old damask. On her little table was a Bible and Prayer-Book, a long-stalked glass with a rose in it, another book less sacred, which she had been reading in the morning, her handkerchief, her eau-de-cologne, her large old watch in an old stand, and those other trifles which every lady's-maid who respects herself keeps ready and in order by her mistress's bedside. Martha, too sleepy to be long about her own preparations, was in bed and asleep almost as soon as Miss Susan put on her glasses. All

was perfectly still, the world out-of-doors held under the spell of the moonlight, the world inside is rapt in sleep and rest. Miss Susan wrapped her dressing-gown about her, and sat up in her chair to think. It was a very cosy, very comfortable chair, not hard and angular like Augustine's, and everything in the room was pleasant and soft, not ascetical and self-denying. Susan Austin was not young, but she had kept something of that curious freshness of soul which some unmarried women carry down to old age. She was not aware in her innermost heart that she was old. In everything external she owned her years fully, and felt them; but in her heart she, who had never passed out of the first stage of life, retained so many of its early illusions as to confuse herself and bewilder her consciousness. When she sat like this thinking by herself, with nothing to remind her of the actual aspect of circumstances, she never could be quite sure whether she was young or old. There was always a momentary glimmer and doubtfulness about her before she settled down to the consideration of her problem, whatever it was, — as to which problem it was, those which had come before her in her youth, which she had settled, or left to float in abeyance for the settling of circumstances—or the actual and practical

matter-of-fact of to-day. For a moment she caught her own mind lingering upon that old story between Augustine and their cousin Farrel, as if it were one of the phases of that which demanded her attention; and then she roused herself sharply to her immediate difficulty, and to consider what she was to do.

It is forlorn in such an emergency to be compelled to deliberate alone, without any sharer of one's anxieties or confidante of one's thoughts. But Miss Susan was used to this, and was willing to recognise the advantage it gave her in the way of independence and prompt conclusion. She was free from the temptation of talking too much, of attacking her opponents with those winged words which live often after the feeling that dictated them has passed. She could not be drawn into any self-committal, for nobody thought or cared what was in her mind. Perhaps, however, it is more easy to exercise that curious casuistry which self-interest originates even in the most candid mind, when it is not necessary to put one's thoughts into words. I cannot tell on what ground it was that this amiable and, on the whole, good woman concluded her opposition to Farrel-Austin, and his undoubted right of inheritance, to be righteous, and even holy. She resisted his claim—because it was

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absolutely intolerable to her to think of giving up her home to him, because she hated and despised him—motives very comprehensible, but not especially generous or elevated in the abstract. She felt, however, and believed—when she sat down in her chair and put on her glasses to reflect how she could baffle and overthrow him—that it was something for the good of the family and the world that she was planning, not anything selfish for her own benefit. If Augustine in one room planned alms and charities for the expiation of the guilt of the family, which had made itself rich by church lands, with the deepest sense that her undertaking was of the most pious character—Susan in another, set herself to ponder how to retain possession of these lands, with a corresponding sense that her undertaking, her determination, were, if not absolutely pious, at least of a noble and elevated character. She did not say to herself that she was intent upon resisting the enemy by every means in her power. She said to herself that she was determined to have justice, and to resist to the last the doing of wrong, and the victory of the unworthy. This was her way of putting it to herself—and herself did not contradict her, as perhaps another listener might have done. A certain enthusiasm even grew in her as

she pondered. She felt no doubt whatever that Farrel-Austin had gained his point by false representations, and had played upon the ignorance of the unknown Austin who had transferred his rights to him, as he said. And how could she tell if this was the true heir? Even documents were not to be trusted to in such a case, nor the sharpest of lawyers—and old Mr. Lincoln, the family solicitor, was anything but sharp. Besides, if this man in Bruges were the right man, he had probably no idea of what he was relinquishing. How could a Flemish tradesman know what were the beauties and attractions of "a place" in the home counties, amid all the wealth and fulness of English lands, and with all the historical associations of Whiteladies? He could not possibly know, or he would not give them up. And if he had a wife, she could not know, or she would never permit such a sacrifice.

Miss Susan sat and thought till the moonlight disappeared from the window, and the summer night felt the momentary chill which precedes dawn. She thought of it till her heart burned. No, she could not submit to this. In her own person she must ascertain if the story was true, and if the strangers really knew what they were doing. It took some time to move her to this resolu-

tion; but at last it took possession of her. To go and undo what Farrel-Austin had done, to wake in the mind of the heir, if this was the heir, that desire to possess which is dominant in most minds, and ever ready to answer to any appeal; she rose almost with a spring of youthful animation from her seat when her thoughts settled upon this conclusion. She put out her lamp and went to the window, where a faint blueness was growing—that dim beginning of illumination which is not night but day, and which a very early bird in the green covert underneath was beginning to greet with the first faint twitter of returning existence. Miss Susan felt herself inspired; it was not to defeat Farrel-Austin, but to prevent wrong, to do justice, a noble impulse which fires the heart and lights the eye.

Thus she made up her mind to an undertaking which afterwards had more effect upon her personal fate than anything else that had happened in her long life. She did it, not only intending no evil, but with a sense of what she believed to be generous feeling expanding her soul. Her own personal motives were so thrust out of sight that she herself did not perceive them—and, indeed, had it been suggested to her that she had personal motives, she would have denied it strenuously. What

interest could she have in substituting one heir for another? But yet Miss Susan's blue eyes shot forth a gleam which was not heavenly as she lay down and tried to sleep. She could not sleep, her mind being excited and full of a thousand thoughts—the last distinct sensation in it before the uneasy doze which came over her senses in the morning being a thrill of pleasure that Farrel-Austin might yet be foiled. But what of that? It was not her part to protect Farrel-Austin; her business was to protect the old stock of the family, and keep the line of succession intact. The more she thought of it, the more did this appear a sacred duty, worthy of any labour and any sacrifice.

CHAPTER VI.

THE breakfast table was spread in the smaller dining-room, a room furnished with quaint old furniture like the hall, which looked out upon nothing but the grass and trees of the garden, bounded by an old mossy wall, as old as the house. The windows were all open, the last ray of the morning sun slanting off the shining panes, the scent of the flowers coming in, and all the morning freshness. Miss Susan came down-stairs full of unusual energy, notwithstanding her sleepless night. She had decided upon something to do, which is always satisfactory to an active mind; and though she was beyond the age at which people generally plan long journeys with pleasure, the prick of something new inspired her and made a stir in her veins. "People live more when they move about," she said to herself, when, with a little wonder and partial amusement at herself, she became conscious of this sensation, and took her seat at

the breakfast table with a sense of stimulated energy which was very pleasant.

Miss Augustine came in after her sister, with her hands folded in her long sleeves, looking more than ever like a saint out of a painted window. She crossed herself as she sat down. Her blue eyes seemed veiled so far as external life went. She was the ideal nun of romance and poetry, not the ruddy-faced, active personage who is generally to be found under that guise in actual life. This was one of her fast-days—and indeed most days were fast-days with her. She was her own rule, which is always a harsher kind of restraint than any rule adapted to common use. Her breakfast consisted of a cup of milk and a small cake of bread. She gave her sister an abstracted kiss, but took no notice of her lively looks. When she withdrew her hands from her sleeves a roll of paper became visible in one of them, which she slowly opened out.

"These are the plans for the chantry, finished at last," she said. "Everything is ready now. You must take them to the vicar, I suppose, Susan. I cannot argue with a worldly-minded man. I will go to the almshouses while you are talking to him, and pray."

"The vicar has no power in the matter," said Miss

Susan. "So long as we are the lay rectors we can build as we please; at the chancel end at least."

Augustine put up her thin hands, just appearing out of the wide sleeves, to her ears. "Susan, Susan! do not use those words, which have all our guilt in them! Lay rectors! Lay robbers! Oh! will you ever learn that this thought is the misery of my life?"

"My dear, we must be reasonable," said Miss Susan. "If you like to throw away—no, I mean to employ your money in building a chantry, I don't object; but we have our rights."

"Our rights are nothing but wrongs," said the other shaking her head, "unless my poor work may be accepted as an expiation. Ours is not the guilt, and therefore, being innocent, we may make the amends."

"I wonder where you got your doctrines from?" said Miss Susan. "They are not Popish either, so far as I can make out; and in some things, Austine, you are not even High Church."

Augustine made no reply. Her attention had failed. She held the drawing before her, and gazed at the image of her chantry, which at last, after many difficulties, she had managed to bring into existence—on paper at least. I do not think she had very clear notions in point of

doctrine. She had taken up with a visionary mediævalism which she did not very well understand, and which she combined unawares with many of the ordinary principles of a moderate English churchwoman. She liked to cross herself, without meaning very much by it, and the idea of an Austin Chantry where service should be said every day, "to the intention of" the Austin family, had been for years her cherished fancy, though she would have been shocked had any advanced Ritualists or others suggested to her that what she meant was a daily mass for the dead. She did not mean this at all, nor did she know very clearly what she meant, except to build a chantry, in which daily service should be maintained for ever, always with a reference to the Austins, and making some sort of expiation, she could not have told what, for the fundamental sin of the family. Perhaps it was merely inability of reasoning, perhaps a disinclination to entangle herself in doctrine at all, that made her prefer to remain in this vagueness and confusion. She knew very well what she wanted to do, but not exactly why.

While her sister looked at her drawings Miss Susan thought it a good moment to reveal her own plans, with, I suppose, that yearning for some sort of sympathy

which survives even in the minds of those who have had full experience of the difficulty or even impossibility of obtaining it. She knew Augustine would not, probably could not, enter into her thoughts, and I am not sure that she desired it—but yet she longed to awaken some little interest.

"I am thinking," she said, "of going away—for a few days."

Augustine took no notice. She examined first the front elevation, then the interior of the chantry. "They say it is against the law," she remarked after a while, "to have a second altar; but every old chantry has it, and without an altar the service would be imperfect. Remember this, Susan; for the vicar, they tell me, will object."

"You don't hear what I say, then? I am thinking of —leaving home."

"Yes, I heard—so long as you settle this for me before you go, that it may be begun at once. Think, Susan! it is the work of my life."

"I will see to it," said Miss Susan with a sigh. "You shall not be crossed, dear, if I can manage it. But you don't ask where I am going or why I am going."

"No," said Augustine calmly; "it is no doubt

about business, and business has no share in my thoughts."

"If it had not a share in my thoughts things would go badly with us," said Miss Susan, colouring with momentary impatience and self-assertion. Then she fell back into her former tone. "I am going abroad, Austine; does not that rouse you? I have not been abroad since we were quite young, how many years ago?—when we went to Italy with my father—when we were all happy together. Ah me! what a difference! Austine, you recollect that?"

"Happy, were we?" said Augustine looking up, with a faint tinge of colour on her paleness; "no, I was never happy till I saw once for all how wicked we were, how we deserved our troubles, and how something might be done to make up for them. I have never really cared for anything else."

This she said with a slight raising of her head, and an air of reality which seldom appeared in her visionary face. It was true, though it was so strange. Miss Susan was a much more reasonable, much more weighty personage, but she perceived this change with a little suspicion, and did not understand the fanciful, foolish sister whom she had loved and petted all her life.

"My dear, we had no troubles then," she said with a wondering look.

"Always, always," said Augustine, "and I never knew the reason, till I found it out." Then this gleam of something more than intelligence faded all at once from her face. "I hope you will settle everything before you go," she said almost querulously; "to be put off now and have to wait would break my heart."

"I'll do it, I'll do it, Austine. I am going—on family business."

"If you see poor Herbert," said Augustine calmly, "tell him we pray for him in the almshouses night and day. That may do him good. If I had got my work done sooner he might have lived. Indeed the devil sometimes tempts me to think it is hard that just when my chantry is beginning and continual prayer going on, Herbert should die. It seems to take away the meaning! But what am I, one poor creature, to make up, against so many that have done wrong?"

"I am not going to Herbert, I am going to Flanders —to Bruges;" said Miss Susan, carried away by a sense of the importance of her mission, and always awaiting, as her right, some spark of curiosity at least.

Augustine returned to her drawing; the waning light died out of her face; she became again the conventional visionary, the recluse of romance, abstracted and indifferent. "The vicar is always against me," she said; "you must talk to him, Susan. He wants the Browns to come into the vacant cottage. He says they have been honest and all that; but they are not praying people. I cannot take them in; it is praying people I want."

"In short, you want something for your money," said her sister; "a percentage, such as it is. You are more a woman of business, my dear, than you think."

Augustine looked at her vaguely, startled. "I try to do for the best," she said. "I do not understand why people should always wish to thwart me; what I want is their good."

"They like their own way better than their good, or rather than what you think is for their good," said Miss Susan. "We all like our own way."

"Not me, not me!" said the other with a sigh; and she rose and crossed herself once more. "Will you come to prayers at the almshouses, Susan? The bell will ring presently, and it would do you good."

"My dear, I have no time," said the elder sister, "I have a hundred things to do."

Augustine turned away with a soft shake of the head. She folded her arms into her sleeves and glided away like a ghost. Presently her sister saw her crossing the lawn, her grey hood thrown lightly over her head, her long robes falling in straight, soft lines, her slim figure moving along noiselessly. Miss Susan was the practical member of the family, and but for her probably the Austins of Whiteladies would have died out ere now by sheer carelessness of their substance and indifference to what was going on around them; but as she watched her sister crossing the lawn, a sense of inferiority crossed her mind. She felt herself worldly, a pitiful creature of the earth, and wished she was as good as Augustine. "But the house, and the farm, and the world must be kept going," she said by way of relieving herself, with a mingling of humour and compunction. It was not much her small affairs could do to make or mar the going on of the world, but yet in small ways and great the world has to be kept going. She went off at once to the bailiff, who was waiting for her, feeling a pleasure in proving to herself that she was busy and had no time, which is perhaps a more usual process of thought with the Marthas of this world than the other plan of finding fault with the Maries; for in their hearts

most women have a feeling that the prayer is the best.

The intimation of Miss Susan's intended absence excited the rest of the household much more than it had excited her sister. "Wherever are you agoing to, miss?" said Cook, who was as old as her mistress, and had never changed her style of addressing her since the days when she was young Miss Susan and played at housekeeping.

"I am going abroad," she answered, with a little innocent pride; for to people who live all their lives at home there is a certain grandeur in going abroad. "You will take great care of my sister, and see that she does not fast too much."

It was a patriarchal household, with such a tinge of familiarity in its dealings with its mistress, as—with servants who have passed their lives in a house—it is seldom possible, even if desirable, to avoid. Stevens the butler stopped open-mouthed, with a towel in his hand, to listen, and Martha approached from the other end of the kitchen, where she had been busy tying up and labelling Cook's newly-made preserves.

"Going abroad!" they all echoed in different keys.

"I expect you all to be doubly careful and attentive,"

said Miss Susan, "though indeed I am not going very far, and probably won't be more than a few days gone. But in the meantime Miss Augustine will require your utmost care. Stevens, I am very much displeased with the way you took it upon you to speak at dinner yesterday. It annoyed my sister extremely, and you had no right to use so much freedom. Never let it happen again."

Stevens was taken entirely by surprise, and stood gazing at her with the bewildered air of a man who, seeking innocent amusement in the hearing of news, is suddenly transfixed by an unexpected thunderbolt. "Me, mum!" said Stevens bewildered, "I—I don't know what you're a talking about." It was an unfair advantage to take.

"Precisely, you," said Miss Susan; "what have you to do with the people at the almshouses? Nobody expects you to be answerable for what they do or don't do. Never let me hear anything of the kind again."

"Oh," said Stevens, with a snort of suppressed offence, "it's them! Miss Austin, I can't promise at no price! if I hears that hold 'ag a praised up to the skies——"

"You will simply hold your tongue," said Miss Susan peremptorily. "What is it to you? My sister knows her own people best."

Upon this the two women in attendance shook their heads, and Stevens, encouraged by this tacit support, took courage.

"She don't, mum, she don't," he said; "if you heard the things they'll say behind her back! It makes me sick, it does, being a faithful servant. If I don't dare to speak up, who can? She's imposed upon to that degree, and made game of, as your blood would run cold to see it; and if I ain't to say a word when I haves the chance, who can? The women sees it even—and it's nat'ral as I should see further than the women."

"Then you'll please to set the women a good example by holding your tongue," said Miss Susan. "Once for all, recollect, all of you, Miss Augustine shall never be crossed while I am mistress of the house. When it goes into other hands you can do as you please."

"Oh laws!" said the Cook, "when it comes to that, mum, none of us has nothing to do here."

"That is as you please, and as Mr.—as the heir pleases," Miss Susan said, making a pause before the last words. Her cheek coloured, her blue eyes grew warm with the new life and energy in her. She went out of the kitchen with a certain swell of anticipated triumph in her whole person. Mr. Farrel-Austin should soon

discover that he was not to have everything his own way. Probably she would find he had deceived the old man at Bruges, that these poor people knew nothing about the true value of what they were relinquishing. Curiously enough, it never occurred to her, to lessen her exhilaration, that to leave the house of her fathers to an old linen-draper from the Low Countries would be little more agreeable than to leave it to Farrel-Austin—nay, even as Everard had suggested to her, that Farrel-Austin, as being an English gentleman, was much more likely to do honour to the old house than a foreigner of inferior position, and ideas altogether different from her own. She thought nothing of this; she ignored herself, indeed, in the matter, which was a thing she was pleased to think of afterwards, and which gave her a little consolation—that is, she thought of herself only through Farrel-Austin, as the person most interested in, and most likely to be gratified by, his downfall.

As the day wore on and the sun got round and blazed on the south front of the house, she withdrew to the porch, as on the former day, and sat there enjoying the coolness, the movement of the leaves, the soft, almost imperceptible breeze. She was more light-hearted than on the previous day when poor Herbert was in her mind,

and when nothing but the success of her adversary seemed possible. Now it seemed to her that a new leaf was turned, a new chapter commenced.

Thus the day went on. In the afternoon she had one visitor, and only one, the vicar, Mr. Gerard, who came by the north gate, as her visitors yesterday had done, and crossed the lawn to the porch with much less satisfaction of mind than Miss Susan had to see him coming.

"Of course you know what has brought me," he said at once, seating himself in a garden-chair which had been standing outside on the lawn, and which he brought in after his first greeting. "This chantry of your sister's is a thing I don't understand, and I don't know how I can consent to it. It is alien to all the customs of the time. It is a thing that ought to have been built three hundred years ago, if at all. It will be a bit of bran new Gothic, a thing I detest; and in short I don't understand it, nor what possible meaning a chantry can have in these days."

"Neither do I," said Miss Susan smiling, "not the least in the world."

"If it is meant for masses for the dead," said Mr. Gerard — "some people I know have gone as far as that—but I could not consent to it, Miss Austin. It

should have been built three hundred years ago, if at all."

"Augustine could not have built it three hundred years ago," said Miss Susan, "for the best of reasons. My own opinion is, between ourselves, that had she been born three hundred years ago she would have been a happier woman; but neither she nor I can change that."

"That is not the question," said the vicar. He was a man with a fine faculty for being annoyed. There was a longitudinal line in his forehead between his eyes, which was continually moving, marking the passing irritations which went and came, and his voice had a querulous tone. He was in the way of thinking that everything that happened out of the natural course was done to annoy him specially, and he felt it a personal grievance that the Austin chantry had not been built in the sixteenth century. "There might have been some sense in it then," he added, "and though art was low about that time, still it would have got toned down, and been probably an ornament to the church; but a white, staring, new thing, with spick and span pinnacles! I do not see how I can consent."

"At all events," said Miss Susan, showing the faintest

edge of claw under the velvet of her touch, "no one can blame you at least, which I think is always a consolation. I have just been going over the accounts for the restoration of the chancel, and I think you may congratulate yourself that you have not got to pay them. Austine would kill me if she heard me, but that is one good of a lay rector. I hope you won't oppose her seriously, Mr. Gerard. It is not masses for the dead she is thinking of. You know her crotchets. My sister has a very fine mind when she is roused to exert it," Miss Susan said with a little dignity, "but it is nonsense to deny that she has crotchets, and I hope you are too wise and kind to oppose her. The endowment will be good, and the chantry pretty. Why, it is by Gilbert Scott."

"No, no, not Sir Gilbert himself; at least, I fear not," said Mr. Gerard, melting.

"One of his favourite pupils, and he has looked at it and approved. We shall have people coming to see it from all parts of the country; and it is Augustine's favourite crotchet. I am sure, Mr. Gerard, you will not seriously oppose."

Thus it was that the vicar was talked over. He reflected afterwards that there was consolation in the view of the subject which she introduced so cunningly,

and that he could no more be found fault with for the new chantry which the lay rector had a right to connect with his part of the church if he chose, than he could be made to pay the bills for the restoration of the chancel. And Miss Susan had put it to him so delicately about her sister's crotchets that what could a gentleman do but yield? The longitudinal line on his forehead smoothed out accordingly, and his tone ceased to be querulous. Yes, there was no doubt she had crotchets, poor soul; indeed, she was half crazy, there could be no doubt, or whole crazy, perhaps, as the village people thought, but a good religious creature, fond of prayers and church services, and not clever enough to go far astray in point of doctrine. As Mr. Gerard went home, indeed, having committed himself, he discovered a number of admirable reasons for tolerating Augustine and her crotchets. If she sank money enough to secure an endowment of sixty pounds a year, in order to have prayers said daily in her chantry, as she called it, it was clear that thirty or forty from Mr. Gerard instead of the eighty he now paid, would be quite enough for his curate's salary. For what could a curate want with more than, or even so much, as a hundred pounds a year? And then the alms-houses disposed of the old people of the parish in the

most comfortable way, and on the whole Augustine did more good than harm. Poor thing! it would be a pity, he thought, to cross this innocent and pious creature, who was "deficient," but too gentle and good to be interfered with in her crotchets. Poor Augustine, whom they all disposed of so calmly! Perhaps it was foolish enough of her to stay alone in the little almshouse chapel all the time that this interview was going on, praying that God would touch the heart of His servant, and render it favourable towards her, while Miss Susan managed it all so deftly by mere sleight of hand; but on the whole Augustine's idea of the world as a place where God did move hearts for small matters as well as great, was a more elevated one than the others'. She felt quite sure when she glided home through the summer fields, still and grey in her strange dress, that God's servant's heart had been moved to favour her, and that she might begin her work at once.

CHAPTER VII.

SUSAN AUSTIN said no more about her intended expedition, except to Martha, who had orders to prepare for the journey, and who was thrown into an excitement somewhat unbecoming her years by the fact that her mistress preferred to take Jane as her attendant, which was a slight very trying to the elder woman. "I cannot indulge myself by taking you," said Miss Susan, "because I want you to take care of my sister; she requires more attendance than I do, Martha, and you will watch over her." I am afraid that Miss Susan had a double motive in this decision, as most people have, and preferred Jane, who was young and strong, to the other, who required her little comforts, and did not like to be hurried, or put out; but she veiled the personal preference under a good substantial reason, which is a very good thing to do in all cases where it is desirable that the wheels of life should go easily. Martha had "a good cry," but then consoled herself with the

importance of her charge. "Not as it wants much cleverness to dress Miss Augustine, as never puts on nothing worth looking at—that grey thing for ever and ever!" she said, with natural contempt. Augustine herself was wholly occupied with the chantry, and took no interest in her sister's movements; and there was no one else to inquire into them or ask a reason. She went off accordingly quite quietly and unobserved, with one box, and Jane in delighted attendance. Miss Susan took her best black silk with her, which she wore seldom, having fallen into the custom of the grey gown to please Augustine, a motive which in small matters was her chief rule of action;—on this occasion, however, she intended to be as magnificent as the best contents of her wardrobe could make her, taking, also, her Indian shawl and newest bonnet. These signs of superiority would not, she felt sure, be thrown away on a linendraper. She took with her, also, by way of appealing to another order of feelings, a very imposing picture of the house of Whiteladies, in which a gorgeous procession, escorting Queen Elizabeth, who was reported to have visited the place, was represented as issuing from the old porch. It seemed to Miss Susan that nobody who saw this picture could be willing to relinquish the house; for,

indeed, her knowledge of Art was limited. She set out one evening, resolved, with heroic courage, to commit herself to the Antwerp boat, which in Miss Susan's early days had been the chief and natural mode of conveyance. Impossible to tell how tranquil the country was as she left it—the labourers going home, the balmy kine wandering devious and leisurely with melodious lowings through the quiet roads. Life would go on with all its quiet routine unbroken, while Miss Susan dared the dangers of the deep, and prayer bell and dinner bell ring just as usual, and Augustine and her almshouse people go through all their pious habitudes. She was away from home so seldom, that this universal sway of common life and custom struck her strangely, with a humiliating sense of her own unimportance—she who was so important, the centre of everything. Jane, her young maid, felt the same sentiment in a totally different way, being full of pride and exultation in her own unusualness, and delicious contempt for those unfortunates to whom this day was just the same as any other. Jane did not fear the dangers of the deep, which she did not know—while Miss Susan did, who was aware what she was about to undergo; but she trusted in Providence to take care of her, and smooth the angry

waves, and said a little prayer of thanksgiving when she felt the evening air come soft upon her face, though the tree-tops would move about against the sky more than was desirable. I do not quite know by what rule of thought it was that Miss Susan felt herself to have a special claim to the succour of Providence as going upon a most righteous errand. She did manage to represent her mission to herself in this light, however. She was going to vindicate the right—to restore to their natural position people who had been wronged. If these said people were quite indifferent both to their wrongs and their rights, that was their own fault, and in no respects Miss Susan's, who had her duty to do, whatever came of it. This she maintained very stoutly to herself, ignoring Farrel-Austin altogether, who might have thought of her enterprise in a different light. All through the night which she passed upon the gloomy ocean in a close little berth, with Jane helpless and wretched, requiring the attention of the stewardess, Miss Susan felt her spirit supported by the consciousness of virtue which was almost heroic. How much more comfortable she would have been at home in the west room, which she remembered so tenderly; how terrible was that rushing sound of waves in her ears, waves separated from her by so fragile a

bulwark, "only a plank between her and eternity!" But all this she was undergoing for the sake of justice and right.

She felt herself, however, like a creature in a dream, when she walked out the morning of her arrival, alone, into the streets of Bruges, confused by the strangeness of the place, which so recalled her youth to her, that she could scarcely believe she had not left her father and brother at the hotel. Once in these early days, she had come out alone in the morning, she remembered, just as she was doing now, to buy presents for her companions; and that curious, delightful sense of half fright, half freedom, which the girl had felt thrilling her through and through while on this escapade, came back to the mind of the woman who was growing old, with a pathetic pleasure. She remembered how she had paused at the corner of this street, afraid to stop, afraid to go on, almost too shy to go into the shops where she had seen the things she wanted to buy. Miss Susan was too old to be shy now. She walked along sedately, not afraid that anybody would stare at her or be rude to her, or troubled by any doubts whether it was "proper;" but yet the past confused her mind. How strange it all was! Could it be that the carillon, which chimed

sweetly, keenly in her ears, like a voice out of her youth, startling her by reiterated calls and reminders, had been chiming out all the ordinary hours—nay, quarters of hours—marking everybody's mealtimes and ordinary every-day vicissitudes, for these forty years past? It was some time before her ear got used to it, before she ceased to start and feel as if the sweet chimes from the belfry were something personal, addressed to her alone. She had been very young when she was in Bruges before, and everything was deeply impressed upon her mind. She had travelled very little since, and all the quaint gables, the squares, the lace-makers seated at their doors, the shop-windows full of peasant jewellery, had the strangest air of familiarity. It was some time even in the curious bewildering tumult of her feelings before she could recollect her real errand. She had not asked any further information from Farrel-Austin. If he had found their unknown relation out by seeing the name of Austin over a shop-door, she surely could do as much. She had, however, wandered into the outskirts of the town before she fully recollected that her mission in Bruges was, first of all, to walk about the streets and find out the strange Austins who were foreigners and tradespeople. She came back, accord-

ingly, as best she could, straying through the devious streets, meeting English travellers with the infallible Murray under their arms, and wondering to herself how people could have leisure to come to such a place as this for mere sight-seeing. That day, however, perhaps because of the strong hold upon her of the past and its recollections, perhaps because of the bewildering sense of mingled familiarity and strangeness in the place, she did not find the object of her search—though, indeed, the streets of Bruges are not so many, or the shops so extensive as to defy the scrutiny of a passer-by. She got tired, and half ashamed of herself to be thus walking about alone, and was glad to take refuge in a dim corner of the Cathedral, where she dropped on one knee in the obscurity, half afraid to be seen by any English visitor in this attitude of devotion in a Roman Catholic church, and then sat down to collect herself, and think over all she had to do. What was it she had to do? To prevent wrong from being done; to help to secure her unknown cousins in their rights. This was but a vague way of stating it, but it was more difficult to put the case to herself if she entered into detail. To persuade them that they had been over-persuaded, that they had too lightly given up advantages which had they known their

real value they would not have given up; to prove to them how pleasant a thing it was to be Austins of Whiteladies. This was what she had to do.

Next morning Miss Susan set out with a clear head and a more distinct notion of what she was about. She had got used to the reiterations of the carillon, to the familiar distant look of the quaint streets. And, indeed, she had not gone very far when her heart jumped up in her breast to see written over a large shop the name of Austin, as Farrel had told her. She stopped on the opposite side and looked at it. It was situated at a bend in the road, where a narrow street debouched into a wider one, and had that air of self-restrained plainness, of being above the paltry art of window-dressing, which is peculiar to old and long-established shops whose character is known, where rich materials are sold at high prices, and everything cheap is contemned. Piles of linen and blankets, and other unattractive articles, were in the broad but dingy window, and in the doorway stood an old man with a black skull-cap on his head, and blue eyes full of vivacity and activity, notwithstanding his years. He was standing at his door looking up and down, with the air of a man who looked for news, or expected some incident other than the tranquil events

around. When Miss Susan crossed the narrow part of the street, which she did with her heart in her mouth, he looked up at her, noting her appearance; and she felt sure that some internal warning of the nature of her errand came into his mind. From this look Miss Susan, quick as a flash of lightning, divined that he was not satisfied with his bargain, that his attention and curiosity were aroused, and that Farrel-Austin's visit had made him curious of other visits, and in a state of expectation. I believe she was right in the idea she thus formed, but she saw it more clearly than M. Austin did, who knew little more than that he was restless, and in an unsettled frame of mind.

"Est-ce vous qui êtes le propriétaire?" said Miss Susan, speaking bluntly, in her bad French, without any polite prefaces, such as befit the language; she was too much excited, even had she been sufficiently conversant with the strange tongue, to know that they were necessary. The shopkeeper took his cap off his bald head, which was venerable, with an encircling ring of white locks, and made her a bow. He was a handsome old man, with blue eyes, such as had always been peculiar to the Austins, and a general resemblance—or so, at least, Miss Susan thought—to the old family pictures at

Whiteladies. Under her best black silk gown, and the Indian shawl which she had put on to impress her unknown relation with a sense of her importance, she felt her heart beating. But, indeed, black silk and India shawls are inconvenient wear in the middle of summer in the Pays Bas; and perhaps this fact had something to do with the flush and tremor of which she was suddenly conscious.

M. Austin, the shopkeeper, took off his cap to her, and answered "Oui, madame," blandly; then, with that instant perception of her nationality, for which the English abroad are not always grateful, he added, "Madame is Inglese? we too. I am Inglese. In what can I be serviceable to madame?"

"Oh, you understand English? Thank heaven!" said Miss Susan, whose French was far from fluent. "I am very glad to hear it, for that will make my business so much the easier. It is long since I have been abroad, and I have almost forgotten the language. Could I speak to you somewhere? I don't want to buy anything," she said abruptly, as he stood aside to let her come in.

"That shall be at the pleasure of madame," said the old man with the sweetest of smiles, "though miladi will not

find better damask in many places. Enter, madame. I will take you to my counting-house, or into my private house, if that will more please you. In what can I be serviceable to madame?"

"Come in here—anywhere where we can be quiet. What I have to say is important," said Miss Susan. The shop was not like an English shop. There was less light, less decoration, the windows were half blocked up, and behind, in the depths of the shop, there was a large, half-curtained window opening into another room at the back. "I am not a customer, but it may be worth your while," said Miss Susan, her breath coming quick on her parted lips.

The shopkeeper made her a bow, which she set down to French politeness, for all people who spoke another language were French to Miss Susan. He said, "Madame shall be satisfied," and led her into the deeper depths, where he placed a chair for her, and remained standing in a deferential attitude. Miss Susan was confused by the new circumstances in which she found herself, and by the rapidity with which event had followed event.

"My name is Austin too," she said, faltering slightly. "I thought when I saw your name, that perhaps you

were a relation of mine—who has been long lost to his family."

"It is too great an honour," said the old shopkeeper, with another bow; "but yes—but yes, it is indeed so. I have seen already another gentleman, a person in the same interests. Yes, it is me. I am Guillaume Austin."

"Guillaume?"

"Yes. William you it call. I have told my name to the other monsieur. He is, he say, the successive—what you call it? The one who comes——"

"The heir——"

"That is the word. I show him my papers—he is satisfied; as I will also to madame with pleasure. Madame is also cousin of Monsieur Farrel? Yes?—and of me? It is too great honour. She shall see for herself. My grandfather was Ingleseman—très Inglese. I recall to myself his figure as if I saw it at this moment. Blue eyes, very clear, pointed nose—ma foi! like the nose of madame."

"I should like to see your papers," said Miss Susan. "Shall I come back in the evening when you have more time? I should like to see your wife—for you have one, surely? and your children."

"Yes, yes; but one is gone," said the shopkeeper. "Figure to yourself, madame, that I had but one son, and he is gone! There is no longer any one to take my place—to come after me. Ah! life is changed when it is so. One lives on—but what is life? a thing we must endure till it comes to an end."

"I know it well," said Miss Susan, in a low tone.

"Madame, too, has had the misfortune to lose her son, like me?"

"Ah, don't speak of it! But I have no son. I am what you call vile fee," said Miss Susan; "an old maid—nothing more. And he is still living, poor boy; but doomed, alas! doomed. Mr. Austin, I have a great many things to speak to you about."

"I attend—with all my heart," said the shopkeeper, somewhat puzzled, for Miss Susan's speech was mysterious, there could be little doubt.

"If I return, then, in the evening, you will show me your papers, and introduce me to your family," said Miss Susan, getting up. "I must not take up your time now."

"But I am delighted to wait upon madame now," said the old man, "and since madame has the bounty to wish to see my family—by here, madame, I beg—enter, and be welcome—very welcome."

Saying this he opened the great window-door in the end of the shop, and Miss Susan, walking forward somewhat agitated, found herself all at once in a scene very unexpected by her, and of a kind for which she was unprepared. She was ushered in at once to the family room and family life, without even the interposition of a passage. The room into which this glass-door opened was not very large, and quite disproportionately lofty. Opposite to the entrance from the shop was another large window, reaching almost to the roof, which opened upon a narrow court, and kept a curious dim daylight, half from without, half from within, in the space, which seemed more narrow than it need have done by reason of the height of the roof. Against this window, in a large easy-chair, sat an old woman in a black gown, without a cap, and with one little tail of grey hair twisted at the back of her head, and curl-papers embellishing her forehead in front. Her gown was rusty, and not without stains, and she wore a large handkerchief, with spots, tied about her neck. She was chopping vegetables in a dish, and not in the least abashed to be found so engaged. In a corner sat a younger woman, also in black, and looking like a gloomy shadow, lingering apart from the light. Another young woman went

and came towards an inner room, in which it was evident the dinner was going to be cooked. A pile of boxes, red and blue, and all the colours of the rainbow, was on a table. There was no carpet on the floor, which evidently had not been *frotté* for some time past, nor curtains at the window, except a melancholy spotted muslin, which hung closely over it, making the scanty daylight dimmer still. Miss Susan drew her breath hard with a kind of gasp. The Austins were people extremely well to do—rich in their way, and thinking themselves very comfortable; but to the prejudiced English eye of their new relation, the scene was one of absolute squalor. Even in an English cottage, Miss Susan thought, there would have been an attempt at some prettiness or other, some air of nicety or ornament; but the comfortable people here (though Miss Susan supposed all foreigners to be naturally addicted to show and glitter) thought of nothing but the necessities of living. They were not in the least ashamed, as an English family would have been, of being "caught" in the midst of their morning's occupations. The old lady put aside the basin with the vegetables, and wiped her hands with a napkin, and greeted her visitor with perfect calm; the others took scarcely any notice. Were these the people whose right

it was to succeed generations of English squires—the dignified race of Whiteladies? Miss Susan shivered as she sat down, and then she began her work of temptation. She drew forth her picture, which was handed round for everybody to see. She described the estate and all its attractions. Would they let this pass away from them? At least they should not do it without knowing what they had sacrificed. To do this, partly in English, which the shopkeeper translated imperfectly, and partly in very bad French, was no small labour to Miss Susan; but her zeal was equal to the tax upon it, and the more she talked, and the more trouble she had to overcome her own repugnance to these new people, the more vehement she became in her efforts to break their alliance with Farrel, and induce them to recover their rights. The young woman who was moving about the room, and whose appearance had at once struck Miss Susan, came and looked over the old mother's shoulder at the picture, and expressed her admiration in the liveliest terms. The *jolie maison* it was, and the *dommage* to lose it, she cried: and these words were very strong pleas in favour of all Miss Susan said.

"Ah, what an abominable law," said the old lady at length, "that excludes the daughters!—sans ça, ma

fille!" and she began to cry a little. "Oh, my son, my son! if the good God had not taken him, what joy to have restored him to the country of his grandfather, to an establishment so charming!"

Miss Susan drew close to the old woman in the rusty black gown, and approached her mouth to her ear.

"Cette jeune femme-là est veuve de votre fils?"

"No. There she is—there in the corner; she who neither smiles nor speaks," said the mother, putting up the napkin with which she had dried her hands, to her eyes.

The whole situation had in it a dreary tragi-comedy, half pitiful, half laughable; a great deal of intense feeling veiled by external circumstances of the homeliest order, such as is often to be found in comfortable, unlovely *bourgeois* households. How it was, in such a matter-of-fact interior that the great temptation of her life should have flashed across Miss Susan's mind, I cannot tell. She glanced from the young wife, very soon to be a mother, who leant over the old lady's chair, to the dark shadow in the corner, who had never stirred from her seat. It was all done in a moment—thought, plan, execution. A sudden excitement took hold upon her. She drew her chair close to the old woman, and bent forward till her lips almost touched her ear.

"L'autre est—la même—que elle?"

"Que voulez-vous dire, madame?"

The old lady looked up at her bewildered, but, caught by the glitter of excitement in Miss Susan's eye, and the panting breath, which bore evidence to some sudden fever in her, stopped short. Her wondering look turned into something more keen and impassioned—a kind of electric spark flashed between the two women. It was done in a moment; so rapidly, that at least (as Miss Susan thought after, a hundred times, and a hundred to that) it was without premeditation; so sudden, that it was scarcely their fault. Miss Susan's eyes gleaming, said something to those of the old Flamande, whom she had never seen before, Guillaume Austin's wife. A curious thrill ran through both—the sting, the attraction, the sharp movement, half pain, half pleasure, of temptation and guilty intention; for there was a sharp and stinging sensation of pleasure in it, and something which made them giddy. They stood on the edge of a precipice, and looked at each other a second time before they took the plunge. Then Miss Susan laid her hand upon the other's arm, gripping it in her passion.

"Venez quelque part pour parler," she said, in her bad French.

CHAPTER VIII.

I CANNOT tell the reader what was the conversation that ensued between Miss Susan and Madame Austin of Bruges, because the two naturally shut themselves up by themselves, and desired no witnesses. They went up-stairs, threading their way through a warehouse full of goods, to Madame Austin's bedroom, which was her reception-room, and, to Miss Susan's surprise, a great deal prettier and lighter than the family apartment below, in which all the ordinary concerns of life were carried on. There were two white beds in it, in a recess with crimson curtains drawn almost completely across—and various pretty articles of furniture, some marqueterie cabinets, and tables which would have made the mouth of any amateur of old furniture water, and two sofas with little rugs laid down in front of them. The boards were carefully waxed and clean, the white curtains drawn over the window, and everything arranged with some care and daintiness. Madame Austin placed

her visitor on the principal sofa, which was covered with tapestry, but rather hard and straight, and then shut the door. She did not mean to be overheard.

Madame Austin was the ruling spirit in the house. It was she that regulated the expenses, that married the daughters, and that had made the match between her son and the poor creature down-stairs, who had taken no part in the conversation. Her husband made believe to supervise, and criticize everything, in which harmless gratification she encouraged him; but in fact his real business was to acquiesce, which he did with great success. Miss Susan divined well when she said to herself that his wife would never permit him to relinquish advantages so great when she knew something of what they really implied; but she too had been broken down by grief, and ready to feel that nothing was of any consequence in life, when Farrel-Austin had found them out. I do not know what cunning devil communicated to Miss Susan the right spell by which to wake up in Madame Austin the energies of a vivacious temperament partially repressed by grief and age; but certainly the attempt was crowned with success. They talked eagerly, with flushed faces and voices which would have been loud had they not feared to be overheard; both

of them carried out of themselves by the strangely exciting suggestion which had passed from one to the other almost without words ; and they parted with close pressure of hands and with meaning looks, notwithstanding Miss Susan's terribly bad French, which was involved to a degree which I hardly dare venture to present to the reader; and many readers are aware, by unhappy experience, what an elderly Englishwoman's French can be. "Je reviendrai encore demain," said Miss Susan. "J'ai beaucoup choses à parler, et vous dira encore à votre mari. Si vous voulez me parler avant cela, allez à l'hôtel ; je serai toujours dans mon appartement. Il est pas ung plaisir pour moi de marcher autour la ville, comme quand j'étais jeune. J'aime rester tranquil; et je reviendrai demain, dans la matin, à votre maison ici. J'ai beaucoup choses de parler autour."

Madame Austin did not know what "parler autour" could mean, but she accepted the puzzle and comprehended the general thread of the meaning. She returned to her sitting-room down-stairs with her head full of a hundred busy thoughts, and Miss Susan went off to her hotel, with a headache, caused by a corresponding overflow in her mind. She was in a great excitement,

which indeed could not be quieted by going to the hotel, but which prompted her to "marcher autour la ville," as she herself said, trying to neutralise the undue activity of her brain by movement of body. It is one of nature's instinctive ways of wearing out emotion. To do wrong is a very strange sensation, and it was one which, in any great degree, was unknown to Miss Susan. She had done wrong, I suppose, often enough before, but she had long outgrown that sensitive stage of mind and body which can seriously regard as mortal sins the little peccadilloes of common life—the momentary failures of temper or rashness of words, which the tender youthful soul confesses and repents of as great sins. Temptation had not come near her virtuous and equable life; and, to tell the truth, she had often felt with a compunction that the confession she sometimes made in church, of a burden of guilt which was intolerable to her, and of sins too many to be remembered, was an innocent hypocrisy on her part. She had taken herself to task often enough for her inability to feel this deep penitence as she ought; and now a real and great temptation had come in her way, and Miss Susan did not feel at all in that state of mind which she would have thought probable. Her first sensation was that of

extreme excitement—a sharp and stinging yet almost pleasurable sense of energy and force and strong will which could accomplish miracles: so I suppose the rebel angels must have felt in the first moment of their sin—intoxicated with the mere sense of it, and of their own amazing force and boldness who dared to do it, and defy the Lord of heaven and earth. She walked about and looked in at the shop-windows, at that wonderful filigree-work of steel and silver which poorest women wear in those Low Countries, and at the films of lace which in other circumstances Miss Susan was woman enough to have been interested in for their own sake. Why could not she think of them?—why could not she care for them now? A deeper sensation possessed her, and its first effect was so strange that it filled her with fright; for, to tell the truth, it was an exhilarating rather than a depressing sensation. She was breathless with excitement, panting, her heart beating. Now and then she looked behind her as if some one were pursuing her. She looked at the people whom she met with a conscious defiance, bidding them with her eyes find out, if they dared, the secret which possessed her completely. This thought was not as other thoughts which come and go in the mind, which give way to passing impres-

sions, yet prove themselves to have the lead by returning to fill up all crevices. It never departed from her for a moment. When she went into the shops to buy, as she did after awhile by way of calming herself down, she was half afraid of saying something about it in the midst of her request to look at laces, or her questions as to the price; and, like other mental intoxications, this unaccomplished intention of evil seemed to carry her out of herself altogether; it annihilated all bodily sensations. She walked about as lightly as a ghost, unconscious of fatigue, unconscious of her physical powers altogether, feeling neither hunger nor weariness. She went through the churches, the picture galleries, looking vaguely at everything, conscious clearly of nothing, now and then horribly attracted by one of those horrible pictures of blood and suffering, the martyrdoms which abound in all Flemish collections. She went into the shops, as I have said, and bought lace, for what reason she did not know, nor for whom; and it was only in the afternoon late that she went back to her hotel, where Jane, frightened, was looking out for her, and thinking her mistress must have been lost or murdered among "them foreigners." "I have been with friends," Miss Susan said, sitting down, bolt upright, on the vacant chair, and

looking Jane straight in the face, to make sure that the simple creature suspected nothing. How could she have supposed Jane to know anything, or suspect? But it is one feature of this curious exaltation of mind, in which Miss Susan was, that reason and all its limitations is for the moment abandoned, and things impossible become likely and natural. After this, however, the body suddenly asserted itself, and she became aware that she had been on foot the whole day, and was no longer capable of any physical exertion. She lay down on the sofa dead tired, and after a little interval had something to eat, which she took with appetite, and looked on her purchases with a certain pleasure, and slept soundly all night—the sleep of the innocent, the sleep of the just. No remorse visited her, or penitence, only a certain breathless excitement stirring up her whole being, a sense of life and strength and power.

Next morning Miss Susan repeated her visit to her new relations at an early hour. This time she found them all prepared for her, and was received not in the general room, but in Madame Austin's chamber, where M. Austin and his wife awaited her coming. The shopkeeper himself had altogether changed in appearance: his countenance beamed; he bowed over the hand

which Miss Susan held out to him, like an old courtier, and looked gratefully at her.

"Madame has come to our house like a good angel," he said. "Ah! it is madame's intelligence which has found out the good news, which *cette pauvre chérie* had not the courage to tell us. I did never think to laugh of good heart again," said the poor man with tears in his eyes, "but this has made me young; and it would almost seem as if we owed it to madame."

"How can that be?" said Miss Susan. "It must have been found out sooner or later. It will make up to you, if anything can, for the loss of your boy."

"If he had but lived to see it!" said the old man with a sob.

The mother stood behind, tearless, with a glitter in her eyes which was almost fierce. Miss Susan did not venture to do more than give her one hurried glance, to which she replied with a gleam of fury, clasping her hands together. Was it fury? Miss Susan thought so, and shrank for the moment, not quite able to understand the feelings of the other woman who had so clearly understood her, yet who now seemed to address to her a look of wild reproach.

"And my poor wife," went on the old shopkeeper,

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"for her it will be an even still more happy—— Tu es contente, bien contente, n'est-ce pas?"

"Oui, mon ami," said the woman, turning her back to him, with once more a glance from which Miss Susan shrank.

"Ah, madame, excuse her; she cannot speak; it is a joy too much," he cried, drying his old eyes.

Miss Susan felt herself constrained and drawn on by the excitement of the moment, and urged by the silence of the other woman, who was as much involved as she.

"My poor boy will have a sadder lot even than yours," she said; "he is dying too young even to hope for any of the joys of life. There is neither wife nor child possible for Herbert." The tears rushed to her eyes as she spoke. Heaven help her! she had availed herself, as it were, of nature and affection to help her to commit her sin with more ease and apparent security. She had taken advantage of poor Herbert in order to wake those tears which gave her credit in the eyes of the unsuspecting stranger. In the midst of her excitement and feverish sense of life, a sudden chill struck at her heart. Had she come to this debasement so soon? Was it possible that in such an emergency she

had made capital and stock-in-trade of her dying boy? This reflection was not put into words, but flashed through her with one of those poignant instantaneous cuts and thrusts which men and women are subject to, invisibly to all the world. M. Austin, forgetting his respect in sympathy, held out his hand to her to press hers with a profound and tender feeling which went to Miss Susan's heart; but she had the courage to return the pressure before she dropped his hand hastily (he thought in English pride and reserve), and, making a visible effort to suppress her emotion, continued, "After this discovery, I suppose your bargain with Mr. Farrel-Austin, who took such an advantage of you, is at an end at once?"

"Speak French," said Madame Austin, with gloom on her countenance; "I do not understand your English."

"Mon amie, you are a little abrupt. Forgive her, madame; it is the excitation—the joy. In women the nerves are so much allied with the sentiments," said the old shopkeeper, feeling himself, like all men, qualified to generalise on this subject. Then he added with dignity, "I promised only for myself. My old companion and me,—we felt no desire to be more rich, to enter

upon another life; but at present it is different. If there comes an inheritor," he added, with a gleam of light over his face, "who shall be born to this wealth, who can be educated for it, who will be happy in it, and great and prosperous—ah, madame! permit that I thank you again! Yes, it is you who have revealed the goodness of God to me. I should not have been so happy to-day but for you."

Miss Susan interrupted him almost abruptly. The sombre shadow on Madame Austin's countenance began to affect her in spite of herself. "Will you write to him," she said, "or would you wish me to explain for you? I shall see him on my return."

"Still English," said Madame Austin, "when I say that I do not understand it! I wish to understand what is said."

The two women looked each other in the face: one wondering, uncertain, half afraid; the other angry, defiant, jealous, feeling her power, and glad, I suppose, to find some possible and apparent cause of irritation by which to let loose the storm in her breast of confused irritation and pain. Miss Susan looked at her and felt frightened; she had even begun to share in the sentiment which made her accomplice so bitter and

fierce; she answered, with something like humility, in her atrocious French.

"Je parle d'un monsieur que vous avez vu, qui est allez ici, qui a parlé à vous de l'Angleterre. M. Austin et vous allez changer votre idées—et je veux dire à cet monsieur que quelque chose de différent est venu, que vous n'est pas de même esprit que avant. Voici!" said Miss Susan, rather pleased with herself for having got on so far in a breath. "Je signifie cela—c'est-à-dire, je offrir mon service pour assister votre mari changer la chose qu'il a faites."

"Oui, mon amie," said M. Austin, "pour casser l'affaire—le contrat que nous avons fait, vous et moi, et que d'ailleurs n'a jamais été exécuté; c'est ça; I shall write, and madame will explique, and all will be made as at first. The gentleman was kind. I should never have known my rights, nor anything about the beautiful house that belongs to us——"

"That may belong to you, on my poor boy's death," said Miss Susan, correcting him.

"Assuredly; after the death of M. le propriétaire actuel. Yes, yes, that is understood. Madame will explain to ce monsieur how the situation has changed, and how the contract is at least suspended in the meantime."

"Until the event," said Miss Susan.

"Until the event, assuredly," said M. Austin, rubbing his hands.

"Until the event," said Madame Austin, recovering herself under this discussion of details. "But it will be wise to treat ce monsieur with much gentleness," she added; "he must be ménagé; for figure to yourself that it might be a girl, and he might no longer wish to pay the money proposed, mon ami. He must be managed with great care. Perhaps if I were myself to go to England to see this monsieur——"

"Mon ange! it would fatigue you to death."

"It is true; and then a country so strange—a cuisine abominable. But I should not hesitate to sacrifice myself, as you well know, Guillaume, were it necessary. Write then, and we will see by his reply if he is angry, and I can go afterwards if it is needful."

"And madame, who is so kind, who has so much bounty for us," said the old man, "madame will explain."

Once more the two women looked at each other. They had been so cordial yesterday, why were not they cordial to-day?

"How is it that madame has so much bounty for

us?" said the old Flemish woman, half aside. "She has no doubt her own reasons?"

"The house has been mine all my life," said Miss Susan, boldly. "I think perhaps, if you get it, you will let me live there till I die. And Farrel-Austin is a bad man," she added with vehemence; "he has done us bitter wrong. I would do anything in the world rather than let him have Whiteladies. I thought I had told you this yesterday. Do you understand me now?"

"I begin to comprehend," said Madame Austin, under her breath.

Finally this was the compact that was made between them. The Austins themselves were to write, repudiating their bargain with Farrel, or at least suspending it, to await an event, of the likelihood of which they were not aware at the time they had consented to his terms; and Miss Susan was to see him, and smooth all down and make him understand. Nothing could be decided till the event. It might be a mere postponement—it might turn out in no way harmful to Farrel, only an inconvenience. Miss Susan was no longer excited, nor so comfortable in her mind as yesterday. The full cup had evaporated, so to speak, and shrunk; it was no longer running over. One or two indications of a

more miserable consciousness had come to her. She had read the shame of guilt and its irritation in her confederate's eyes; she had felt the pain of deceiving an unsuspecting person. These were new sensations, and they were not pleasant; nor was her brief parting interview with Madame Austin pleasant. She had not felt, in the first fervour of temptation, any dislike to the close contact which was necessary with that homely person, or the perfect equality which was necessary between her and her fellow-conspirator; but to-day Miss Susan did feel this, and shrank. She grew impatient of the old woman's brusque manner, and her look of reproach. "As if she were any better than me," said poor Miss Susan to herself. Alas! into what moral depths the proud Englishwoman must have fallen who could compare herself with Madame Austin! And when she took leave of her, and Madame Austin, recovering her spirits, breathed some confidential details—half jocular, and altogether familiar, with a breath smelling of garlic —into Miss Susan's ear, she fell back, with a mixture of disdain and disgust which it was almost impossible to conceal. She walked back to the hotel this time without any inclination to linger, and gave orders to Jane to prepare at once for the home journey. The only thing

that did her any good, in the painful tumult of feeling which had succeeded her excitement, was a glimpse which she caught in passing into the same lofty common room in which she had first seen the Austin family. The son's widow still sat a gloomy shadow in her chair in the corner; but in the full light of the window, in the big easy-chair which Madame Austin had filled yesterday, sat the daughter of the house with her child on her lap, leaning back and holding up the plump baby with pretty outstretched arms. Whatever share she might have in the plot was involuntary. She was a fair-haired, round-faced Flemish girl, innocent and merry. She held up her child in her pretty round sturdy arms, and chirruped and talked nonsense to it in a language of which Miss Susan knew not a word. She stopped and looked a moment at this pretty picture, then turned quickly, and went away. After all, the plot was all in embryo as yet. Though evil was meant, Providence was still the arbiter, and good and evil alike must turn upon the event.

CHAPTER IX.

"DON'T you think he is better, mamma—a little better to-day?"

"Ah, mon Dieu, what can I say, Reine? To be a little better in his state is often to be worst of all. You have not seen so much as I have. Often, very often, there is a gleam of the dying flame in the socket; there is an air of being well—almost well. What can I say? I have seen it like that. And they have all told us that he cannot live. Alas, alas, my poor boy!"

Madame de Mirfleur buried her face in her handkerchief as she spoke. She was seated in the little sitting-room of a little house in an Alpine valley, where they had brought the invalid when the summer grew too hot for him on the shores of the Mediterranean. He himself had chosen the Kanderthal as his summer quarters, and with the obstinacy of a sick man had clung to the notion. The valley was shut in by a circle of snowy peaks towards the east; white, dazzling mountain-tops, which yet looked

small and homely and familiar in the shadow of the bigger Alps around. A little mountain stream ran through the valley, across which, at one point, clustered a knot of houses, with a homely inn in the midst. There were trout in the river, and the necessaries of life were to be had in the village, through which a constant stream of travellers passed during the summer and autumn, parties crossing the steep pass of the Gemmi, and individual tourists of more enterprising character fighting their way from this favourable centre into various unknown recesses of the hills. Behind the châlet a waterfall kept up a continuous murmur, giving utterance, as it seemed, to the very silence of the mountains. The scent of pine-woods was in the air; to the west the glory of the sunset shone over a long broken stretch of valley, uneven moorland interspersed with clumps of wood. To be so little out of the way—nay, indeed, to be in the way—of the summer traveller, it was singularly wild and quaint and fresh. Indeed, for one thing, no tourist ever stayed there except for food and rest, for there was nothing to attract any one in the plain little secluded village, with only its circle of snowy peaks above its trout-stream, and its sunsets, to catch any fanciful eye. Sometimes, however, a fanciful eye was caught by these charms, as in the case of poor

Herbert Austin, who had been brought here to die. He lay in the little room which communicated with this sitting-room, in a small wooden chamber opening upon a balcony, from which you could watch the sun setting over the Kanderthal, and the moon rising over the snow-white glory of the Dolden-horn, almost at the same moment. The châlet belonged to the inn, and was connected with it by a covered passage. The summer was at its height, and still poor Herbert lingered, though M. de Mirfleur, in pleasant Normandy, grew a little weary of the long time his wife's son took in dying; and Madame de Mirfleur herself, as jealous Reine would think sometimes, in spite of herself, grew weary too, thinking of her second family at home, and the husband whom Reine had always felt to be an offence. The mother and sister who were thus watching over Herbert's last moments were not so united in their grief and pious duties as might have been supposed. Generally it is the mother whose whole heart is absorbed in such watching, and the young sister who is to be pardoned if sometimes, in the sadness of the shadow that precedes death, her young mind should wander back to life and its warmer interests with a longing which makes her feel guilty. But in this case these positions were reversed. It was the mother who longed

involuntarily for the life she had left behind her, and whose heart reverted wistfully to something brighter and more hopeful, to other interests and loves as strong, if not stronger, than that she felt in and for her eldest son. When it is the other way the sad mother pardons her child for a wandering imagination; but the sad child, jealous and miserable, does not forgive the mother, who has so much to fall back upon. Reine had never been able to forgive her mother's marriage. She never named her by her new name without a thrill of irritation. Her stepfather seemed a standing shame to her, and every new brother and sister who came into the world was a new offence against Reine's delicacy. She had been glad, very glad, of Madame de Mirfleur's aid in transporting Herbert hither, and at first her mother's society, apart from the new family, had been very sweet to the girl, who loved her, notwithstanding the fantastic sense of shame which possessed her, and her jealousy of all her new connections. But when Reine, quick-sighted with the sharpened vision of jealousy and wounded love, saw, or thought she saw, that her mother began to weary of the long vigil, that she began to wonder what her little ones were doing, and to talk of all the troubles of a long absence, her heart rose impatient in an agony of anger

and shame and deep mortification. Weary of waiting for her son's death—her eldest son, who ought to have been her only son—weary of those lingering moments which were now all that remained to Herbert! Reine, in the anguish of her own deep grief and pity and longing hold upon him, felt herself sometimes almost wild against her mother. She did so now, when Madame de Mirfleur, with a certain calm, though she was crying, shook her head and lamented that such gleams of betterness were often the precursors of the end. Reine did not weep when her mother buried her face in her delicate perfumed handkerchief. She said to herself fiercely, "Mamma likes to think so; she wants to get rid of us, and get back to those others;" and looked at her with eyes which shone hot and dry, with a flushed cheek and clenched hands. It was all she could do to restrain herself, to keep from saying something which good sense and good taste, and a lingering natural affection, alike made her feel that she must not say. Reine was one of those curious creatures in whom two races mingle. She had the Austin blue eyes, but with a light in them such as no Austin had before; but she had the dark-brown hair, smooth and silky, of her French mother, and something of the piquancy of feature, the little petulant nose,

the mobile countenance of the more vivacious blood. Her figure was like a fairy's, little and slight; her movements, both of mind and body, rapid as the stirrings of a bird; she went from one mood to another instantaneously, which was not the habit of her father's deliberate race. Miss Susan thought her all French—Madame de Mirfleur all English; and indeed both with some reason —for when in England this perverse girl was full of enthusiasm for everything that belonged to her mother's country, and when in France was the most prejudiced and narrow-minded of Englishwomen. Youth is always perverse, more or less, and there was a double share of its fanciful self-will and changeableness in Reine, whose circumstances were so peculiar and her temptations so many. She was so rent asunder by love and grief, by a kind of adoration for her dying brother, the only being in the world who belonged exclusively to herself, and jealous suspicion that he did not get his due from others, that her petulance was very comprehensible. She waited till Madame de Mirfleur came out of her handkerchief, still with hot and dry and glittering eyes.

"You think it would be well if it were over," said Reine; "that is what I have heard people say. It would be well—yes, in order to release his nurses and

attendants, it would be well if it should come to an end. Ah, mamma, you think so too—you, his mother! You would not harm him nor shorten his life, but yet you think, as it is hopeless, it might be well: you want to go to your husband and your children!"

"If I do, that is simple enough," said Madame de Mirfleur. "Ciel! how unjust you are, Reine! because I tell you the result of a little rally like Herbert's is often not happy. I want to go to my husband, and to your brothers and sisters, yes—I should be unnatural if I did not—but that my duty, which I will never neglect, calls upon me here."

"Oh, do not stay!" cried Reine vehemently—"do not stay! I can do all the duty. If it is only duty that keeps you, go, mamma, go! I would not have you, for that reason, stay another day."

"Child! how foolish you are!" said the mother. "Reine, you should not show at least your repugnance to everything I am fond of. It is wicked—and, more, it is foolish. What can any one think of you? I will stay while I am necessary to my poor boy; you may be sure of that."

"Not necessary," said Reine—"oh, not necessary! *I* can do all for him that is necessary. He is all I

have in the world. There are neither husband nor children that can come between Herbert and me. Go, mamma—for Heaven's sake, go! When your heart is gone already, why should you remain? I can do all he requires. Oh, please, go!"

"You are very wicked, Reine," said her mother, "and unkind! You do not reflect that I stay for you. What are you to do when you are left all alone?—you, who are so unjust to your mother? I stay for that. What would you do?"

"Me!" said Reine. She grew pale suddenly to her very lips, struck by this sudden suggestion in the sharpest way. She gave a sob of tearless passion. She knew very well that her brother was dying; but thus to be compelled to admit and realise it, was more than she could bear. "I will do the best I can," she said, closing her eyes in the giddy faintness that came over her. "What does it matter about me?"

"The very thought makes you ill," said Madame de Mirfleur. "Reine, you know what is coming, but you will never allow yourself to think of it. Pause now, and reflect; when my poor Herbert is gone, what will become of you, unless I am here to look after you? You will have to do everything yourself. Why should we refuse

to consider things which we know must happen? There will be the funeral—all the arrangements—"

"Mamma! mamma! have you a heart of stone?" cried Reine. She was shocked and wounded and stung to the very soul. To speak of his funeral, almost in his presence, seemed nothing less than brutal to the excited girl; and all these matter-of-fact indications of what was coming jarred bitterly upon the heart, in which, I suppose, hope will still live while life lasts. Reine felt her whole being thrill with the shock of this terrible, practical touch, which to her mother seemed merely a simple putting into words of the most evident and unavoidable thought.

"I hope I have a heart like all the rest of the world," said Madame de Mirfleur. "And you are excited and beside yourself, or I could not pass over your unkindness as I do. Yes, Reine, it is my duty to stay for poor Herbert, but still more for you. What would you do?"

"What would it matter?" cried Reine bitterly—"not drop into his grave with him—ah no; one is not permitted that happiness. One has to stay behind and live on, when there is nothing to live for more!"

"You are impious, my child," said her mother. "And, again, you are foolish; you do not reflect how young you

are, and that life has many interests yet in store for you —new connections, new duties——"

"Husbands and children!" cried Reine with scornful bitterness, turning her blue eyes, agleam with that feverish fire which tells at once of the necessity and impossibility of tears, upon her mother. Then her countenance changed all in a moment. A little bell tinkled faintly from the next room. "I am coming," she cried, in a tone as soft as the summer air that caressed the flowers in the balcony. The expression of her face was changed and softened; she became another creature in a moment. Without a word or a look more, she opened the door of the inner room and disappeared.

Madame de Mirfleur looked after her, not without irritation; but she was not so fiery as Reine, and she made allowances for the girl's folly, and calmed down her own displeasure. She listened for a moment to make out whether the invalid's wants were anything more than usual, whether her help was required; and then drawing towards her a blotting-book which lay on the table, she resumed her letter to her husband. She was not so much excited as Reine by this interview, and, indeed, she felt she had only done her duty in indicating to the girl very plainly that life must go on and be provided

for, even after Herbert had gone out of it. "My poor boy!" she said to herself, drying some tears; but she could not think of dying with him, or feel any despair from that one loss; she had many to live for, many to think of, even though she might have him no longer. "Reine is excited and unreasonable, as usual," she wrote to her husband; "always jealous of you, mon ami, and of our children. This arises chiefly from her English ideas, I am disposed to believe. Perhaps when the sad event which we are awaiting is over, she will see more clearly that I have done the best for her as well as for myself. We must pardon her in the meantime, poor child. It is in her blood. The English are always more or less fantastic. We others, French, have true reason. Reassure yourself, mon cher ami, that I will not remain a day longer than I can help away from you and our children. My poor Herbert sinks daily. Think of our misery!—you cannot imagine how sad it is. Probably in a week, at the furthest, all will be over. Ah, mon Dieu! what it is to have a mother's heart! and how many martyrdoms we have to bear!" Madame de Mirfleur wrote this sentence with a very deep sigh, and once more wiped from her eyes a fresh gush of tears. She was perfectly correct in every way as a mother. She

felt as she ought to feel, and expressed her sorrow as it was becoming to express it, only she was not absorbed by it—a thing which is against all true rules of piety and submission. She could not rave like Reine, as if there was nothing else worth caring for, except her poor Herbert, her dear boy. She had a great many other things to care for; and she recognised all that must happen, and accepted it as necessary. Soon it would be over; and all recovery being hopeless, and the patient having nothing to look forward to but suffering, could it be doubted that it was best for him to have his suffering over? though Reine, in her rebellion against God and man, could not see this, and clung to every lingering moment which could lengthen out her brother's life.

Reine herself cleared like a cloudy sky as she passed across the threshold into her brother's room. The change was instantaneous. Her blue eyes, which had a doubtful light in them, and looked sometimes fierce and sometimes impassioned, were now as soft as the sky. The lines of irritation were all smoothed from her brow and from under her eyes. Limpid eyes, soft looks, an unruffled, gentle face, with nothing in it but love and tenderness, was what she showed always to her sick brother. Herbert knew her only under this aspect,

though, with the clear-sightedness of an invalid, he had divined that Reine was not always so sweet to others as to himself.

"You called me," she said, coming up to his bed-side with something caressing, soothing, in the very sound of her step and voice; "you want me, Herbert?"

"Yes; but I don't want you to do anything. Sit down by me, Reine; I am tired of my own company; that is all."

"And so am I—of everybody's company but yours," she said, sitting down by the bedside and stooping her pretty shining head to kiss his thin hand.

"Thanks, dear, for saying such pretty things to me. But, Reine, I heard voices; you were talking—was it with mamma?—not so softly as you do to me."

"Oh, it was nothing," said Reine with a flush. "Did you hear us, poor boy? Oh, that was wicked! Yes, you know there are things that make me—I do not mean angry—I suppose I have no right to be angry with mamma——"

"Why should you be angry with any one?" he said softly. "If you had to lie here like me, you would think nothing was worth being angry about. My poor Reine! you do not even know what I mean."

"Oh no; there is so much that is wrong," said Reine —"so many things that people do—so many that they think—their very ways of doing even what is right enough. No, no; it is worth while to be angry about many, many things. I do not want to learn to be indifferent; besides, that would be impossible to me—it is not my nature."

The invalid smiled and shook his head softly at her. "Your excuse goes against yourself," he said. "If you are ruled by your nature, must not others be moved by theirs? You active-minded people, Reine, you would like every one to think like you; but if you could accomplish it, what a monotonous world you would make! I should not like the Kanderthal if all the mountain-tops were shaped the same; and I should not perhaps love you so much if you were less yourself. Why not let other people, my Reine, be themselves too?"

The brother and sister spoke French, which, more than English, had been the language of their childhood.

"Herbert, don't say such things!" cried the girl. "You do not love me for this or for that, as strangers might, but because I am me, Reine, and you are you, Herbert. That is all we want. Ah yes, perhaps if I were very good I should like to be loved for being good.

I don't know; I don't think it even then. When they used to promise to love me if I was good at Whiteladies, I was always naughty—on purpose?—yes, I am afraid. Herbert, should not you like to be at Whiteladies, lying on the warm, warm grass in the orchard, underneath the great apple-tree, with the bees humming all about, and the dear white English clouds floating and floating, and the sky so deep, deep, that you could not fathom it? Ah!" cried Reine, drawing a deep breath, "I have not thought of it for a long time; but I wish we were there."

The sick youth did not say anything for a moment; his eyes followed her look, which she turned instinctively to the open window. Then he sighed; then raising himself a little, said, with a gleam of energy, "I am certainly better, Reine. I should like to get up and set out across the Gemmi, down the side of the lake that must be shining so in the sun. That's the brightest way home." Then he laughed, with a laugh which, though feeble, had not lost the pleasant ring of youthfulness. "What wild ideas you put into my head!" he said. "No, I am not up to that yet; but, Reine, I am certainly better. I have such a desire to get up; and I thought I should never get up again."

"I will call François!" cried the girl eagerly. He had been made to get up for days together without any will of his own, and now that he should wish it seemed to her a step towards that recovery which Reine could never believe impossible. She rushed out to call his servant, and waited, with her heart beating, till he should be dressed, her thoughts already dancing forward to brighter and brighter possibilities. "He has never had the good of the mountain air," said Reine to herself, "and the scent of the pine-woods. He shall sit on the balcony to-day, and to-morrow go out in the chair, and next week, perhaps—who knows?—he may be able to walk up to the waterfall, and—O God! O Dieu tout-puissant! O doux Jésu!" cried the girl, putting her hands together, "I will be good! I will be good! I will endure anything; if only he may live!—if only he may live!"

CHAPTER X.

THIS little scene took place in the village of Kandersteg, at the foot of the hills, exactly on the day when Miss Susan executed her errand in the room behind the shop, in low-lying Bruges, among the flat canals and fat Flemish fields. The tumult in poor Reine's heart would have been almost as strange to Miss Susan as it was to Reine's mother; for it was long now since Herbert had been given up by everybody, and since the doctors had all said, that "nothing short of a miracle" could save him. Neither Miss Susan nor Madame de Mirfleur believed in miracles. But Reine who was young had no such limitation of mind, and never could nor would acknowledge that anything was impossible. "What does impossible mean?" Reine cried in her vehemence, on this very evening, after Herbert had accomplished her hopes, had stayed for an hour or more on the balcony and felt himself better for it, and ordered François to prepare his wheeled chair for to-morrow. Reine had much ado not to throw her arms

round François' neck, when he pronounced solemnly that "Monsieur est mieux, décidément mieux." "Même," added François, "il a un petit air de je ne sais quoi —quelque chose—un rien—un regard——"

"N'est ce pas, mon ami!" cried Reine transported. Yes, there was a something, a nothing, a changed look which thrilled her with the wildest hopes,—and it was after this talk that she confronted Madame de Mirfleur with the question, "What does impossible mean? It means only, I suppose, that God does not interfere—that He lets nature go on in the common way. Then nothing is impossible; because at any moment, God *may* interfere if He pleases. Ah! He has His reasons, I suppose. If He were never to interfere at all, but leave nature to do her will, it is not for us to blame Him," cried Reine with tears, "but yet always He may; so there is always hope, and nothing is impossible in this world."

"Reine, you speak like a child," said her mother. "Have not I prayed and hoped too for my boy's life? But when all say it is impossible——"

"Mamma," said Reine, "when my piano jars, it is impossible for me to set it right—if I let it alone, it goes worse and worse, if I meddle with it in my ignorance, it

goes worse and worse. If you, even, who know more than I do, touch it, you cannot mend it. But the man comes who knows, et voilà! c'est tout simple," cried Reine. "He touches something we never observed, he makes something rise or fall, and all is harmonious again. That is like God. He does not do it always, I know. Ah! how can I tell why? If it was me," cried the girl, with tears streaming from her eyes, "I would save every one—but He is not like me."

"Reine, you are impious—you are wicked; how dare you speak so?"

"Oh, no, no! I am not impious," she cried, dropping upon her knees—all the English part in her, all her reason and self-restraint broken down by extreme emotion. "The bon Dieu knows I am not! I know, I know He does, and sees me, the good Father, and is sorry, and considers with Himself in His great heart if He will do it even yet. Oh, I know, I know!" cried the weeping girl, "some must die, and He considers long; but tell me He does not see me, does not hear me, is not sorry for me—how is He then my Father? No!" she said softly, rising from her knees and drying the tears from her face, "what I feel is that He is thinking it over again."

Madame de Mirfleur was half afraid of her daughter, thinking she was going out of her mind. She laid her hand upon Reine's shoulder with a soothing touch. "Chérie!" she said, "don't you know it was all decided and settled before you were born, from the beginning of the world?"

"Hush!" said Reine, in her excitement. "I can feel it even in the air. If our eyes were clear enough, we should see the angels waiting to know. I dare not pray any more, only wait like the angels. He is considering. Oh! pray, pray!" the poor child cried, feverish and impassioned. She went out into the balcony and knelt down there, leaning her forehead against the wooden railing. The sky shone above with a thousand stars, the moon, which was late that night, had begun to throw upwards from behind the pinnacles of snow, a rising whiteness, which made them gleam; the waterfall murmured softly in the silence; the pines joined in their continual cadence and sent their aromatic odours like a breath of healing, in soft waves towards the sick man's chamber. There was a stillness all about as if, as poor Reine said, God himself was considering, weighing the balance of death or life. She did not look at the wonderful landscape around, or see or even feel its beauty.

Her mind was too much absorbed—not praying, as she said, but fixed in one wonderful voiceless aspiration. This fervour and height of feeling died away after a time, and poor little Reine came back to common life, trembling, with a thrill in all her nerves, and chilled with over emotion, but yet calm, having got some strange gleam of encouragement, as she thought, from the soft air and the starry skies.

"He is fast asleep," she said to her mother when they parted for the night, with such a smile on her face as only comes after much tears, and the excitement of great suffering, "quite fast asleep, breathing like a child. He has not slept so before, almost for years."

"Poor child," said Madame de Mirfleur, kissing her. She was not moved by Reine's visionary hopes. She believed much more in the doctors, who had described to her often enough—for she was curious on such subjects—how Herbert's disease had worked, and of the "perforations" that had taken place, and the "tissue" that was destroyed. She preferred to know the worst, she had always said, and she had a strange inquisitive relish for these details. She shook her head and cried a little, and said her prayers too with more fervour than usual, after she parted from Reine. Poor Herbert, if he

could live after all, how pleasant it would be! how sweet to take M. de Mirfleur and the children to her son's château in England, and to get the good of his wealth. Ah! what would not she give for his life, her poor boy, her eldest, poor Austin's child, whom indeed she had half forgotten, but who had always been so good to her! Madame de Mirfleur cried over the thought, and said her prayers fervently, with a warmer petition for Herbert than usual; but even as she prayed she shook her head; she had no faith in her own prayers. She was a French Protestant, and knew a great deal about theology, and perhaps had been rather shaken by the many controversies which she had heard on the subject. And accordingly she shook her head; to be sure, she said to herself, there was no doubt that God could do everything —but, as a matter of fact, it was evident that this was not an age of miracles; and how could we suppose that all the economy of heaven and earth could be stopped and turned aside, because one insignificant creature wished it! She shook her head; and I think whatever theory of prayer we may adopt, the warmest believer in its efficacy would scarcely expect any very distinct answer to such prayers as those of Madame de Mirfleur.

Herbert and Reine Austin had been brought up almost

entirely together from their earliest years. Partly from his delicate health and partly from their semi-French training, the boy and girl had not been separated as boys and girls generally are by the processes of education. Herbert had never been strong, and consequently had never been sent to school or college. He had had tutors from time to time, but as nobody near him was much concerned about his mental progress, and his life was always precarious, the boy was allowed to grow up, as girls sometimes are, with no formal education at all, but a great deal of reading; his only superiority over his sister in this point was, that he knew after a fashion Latin and Greek, which Madame de Mirfleur and even Miss Susan Austin would have thought it improper to teach a girl; while she knew certain arts of the needle which it was beneath man's dignity to teach a boy. Otherwise they had gone through the selfsame studies, read the same books and mutually communicated to each other all they found therein. The affection between them, and their union, was thus of a quite special and peculiar character. Each was the other's family concentrated in one. Their frequent separations from their mother and isolation by themselves at Whiteladies, where at first the two little brown French

mice, as Miss Susan had called them, were but little appreciated, had thrown Reine and Herbert more and more upon each other for sympathy and companionship. To be sure as they grew older they became by natural process of events the cherished darlings of Whiteladies, to which at first they were a trouble and oppression; but the aunts were old and they were young, and except Everard Austin had no companions but each other. Then their mother's marriage, which occurred when Herbert was about fourteen and his sister two years younger, gave an additional closeness, as of orphans altogether forsaken, to their union. Herbert was the one who took this marriage most easily. "If mamma likes it, it is no one else's business," he had said with unusual animation when Miss Susan began to discuss the subject; it was not his fault, and Herbert had no intention of being brought to account for it. He took it very quietly and had always been quite friendly to his stepfather, and heard of the birth of the children with equanimity. His feelings were not so intense as those of Reine; he was calm by nature, and illness had hushed and stilled him. Reine, on the other hand, was more shocked and indignant at this step on her mother's part than words can say. It forced her into precocious

womanhood, so much did it go to her heart. To say that she hated the new husband and the new name which her mother had chosen, was little. She felt herself insulted by them, young as she was. The blood came hot to her face at thought of the marriage, as if it had been something wrong—and her girlish fantastic delicacy never recovered the shock. It turned her heart from her mother who was no longer hers, and fixed it more and more upon Herbert, the only being in the world who was hers, and in whom she could trust fully. "But if I were to marry too!" he said to her once, in some moment of gayer spirits. "It is natural that you should marry, not unnatural," cried Reine; "it would be right, not wretched. I might not like it, probably I should not like it—but it would not change my ideal." This serious result had happened in respect to her mother, who could no longer be Reine's ideal, whatever might happen. The girl was so confused in consequence, and broken away from all landmarks, that she and those who had charge of her, had anything but easy work in the days before Herbert's malady declared itself. This had been the saving of Reine; she had devoted herself to her sick brother heart and soul, and the jar in her mind had ceased to communicate false notes to everything

around. It was now two years since the malady which had hung over him all his life, had taken a distinct form; though even now, the doctors allowed, there were special points in it which made Herbert unlike other consumptive patients, and sometimes inclined a physician who saw him for the first time, to entertain doubts as to what the real cause of his sufferings was, and to begin hopefully some new treatment, which ended like all the rest in disappointment. He had been sent about from one place to another, to sea air, to mountain air, to soft Italian villas, to rough homes among the hills, and wherever he went Reine had gone with him. One winter they had passed in the south of France, another on the shores of the Mediterranean just across the Italian border. Sometimes the two went together where English ladies were seldom seen, and where the girl, half afraid, clinging to Herbert's arm as long as he was able to keep up a pretence of protecting her, and protecting him when that pretence was over, had to live the homeliest life, with almost hardship in it, in order to secure good air or tending for him.

This life had drawn them yet closer and closer together. They had read and talked together, and exchanged with each other all the eager, irrestrainable

opinions of youth. Sometimes they would differ on a point and discuss it with that lively fulness of youthful talk which so often looks like eloquence; but more often the current of their thoughts ran in the same channel, as was natural with two so nearly allied. During all this time Reine had been subject to a sudden vertigo, by times, when looking at him suddenly, or recalled to it by something that was said or done, there would come to her, all at once, the terrible recollection that Herbert was doomed. But except for this and the miserable moments when a sudden conviction would seize her that he was growing worse, the time of Herbert's illness was the most happy in Reine's life. She had no one to find fault with her, no one to cross her in her ideas of right and wrong. She had no one to think of but Herbert, and to think of him and be with him had been her delight all her life. Except in the melancholy moments I have indicated when she suddenly realised that he was going from her, Reine was happy; it is so easy to believe that the harm which is expected will not come when it comes softly *au petit pas*—and so easy to feel that good is more probable than evil. She had even enjoyed their wandering, practising upon herself an easy deception; until the time came when Herbert's strength had failed

altogether, and Madame de Mirfleur had been sent for, and every melancholy preparation was made which noted that it was expected of him that now he should die. Poor Reine woke up suddenly out of the thoughtless happiness she had permitted herself to fall into; might she perhaps have done better for him, had she always been dwelling upon his approaching end, and instead of snatching so many flowers of innocent pleasure on the road, had thought of nothing but the conclusion which now seemed to approach so rapidly? She asked herself this question sometimes, sitting in her little chamber behind her brother's, and gazing at the snow-peaks where they stood out against the sky—but she did not know how to answer it. And in the meantime Herbert had grown more and more to be all in all to her, and she did not know how to give him up. Even now, at what everybody thought was his last stage, Reine was still ready to be assailed by those floods of hope which are terrible when they fail, as rapidly as they rose. Was this to be so? Was she to lose him, who was all in all to her? She said to herself, that to nurse him all her life long would be nothing—to give up all personal prospects and anticipations such as most girls indulge in, would be nothing—nor that he should be ill always,

spending his life in the dreary vicissitudes of sickness. Nothing, nothing! so long as he lived. She could bear all, be patient with everything, never grumble, never repine; indeed these words seemed as idle words to the girl, who could think of nothing better or brighter than to nurse Herbert for ever and be his perpetual companion. Without him her life shrank into a miserable confusion and nothingness. With him, however ill he might be, however weak, she had her certain and visible place in the world, her duties which were dear to her, and was to herself a recognisable existence; but without Herbert, Reine could not realise herself. To think, as her mother had suggested, of what would happen to her when he died, of the funeral, and the dismal desolation after, was impossible to her. Her soul sickened and refused to look at such depths of misery; but yet when, more vaguely, the idea of being left alone had presented itself to her, Reine had felt with a gasp of breathless anguish, that nothing of her except the very husk and rind of herself could survive Herbert. How could she live without him? To be the least thought of in her mother's house, the last in it, yet not of it, disposed of by a man who was not her father, and whose very existence was an insult to her, and pushed aside by the

children whom she never called brothers and sisters; it would not be her who should bear this, but some poor shell of her, some ghost who might bear her name.

On the special night which we have just described, when the possibility of recovery for her brother again burst upon her, she sat up late with her window open, looking out upon the moonlight as it lighted up the snow-peaks. They stood round in a close circle, peak upon peak, noiseless as ghosts and as pale, abstracted, yet somehow looking to her excited imagination as if they put their great heads nearer together in the silence, and murmured to each other something about Herbert. It seemed to Reine that the pines too were saying something, but that was sadder, and chilled her. Earth and heaven were full of Herbert, everything was occupied about him; which indeed suited well enough with that other fantastic frenzy of hers, that God was thinking it over again, and that there was a pause in all the elements of waiting, to know how it was to be. François, Herbert's faithful servant, always sat up with him at night or slept in his room when the vigil was unnecessary, so that Reine was never called upon thus to exhaust her strength. She stole into her brother's room again in the middle of the night before she went to bed.

He was still asleep, sleeping calmly without any hardness of breathing, without any feverish flush on his cheek, or exhausting moisture on his forehead. He was still and in perfect rest, so happy and comfortable that François had coiled himself upon his truckle-bed and slept as soundly as the invalid he was watching. Reine laid her hand upon Herbert's forehead lightly, to feel how cool it was; he stirred a little, but no more than a child would, and by the light of the faint night-lamp she saw that a smile came over his face like a ray of sunshine. After this she stole away back to her own room like a ghost, and dropped by the side of her little bed, unable to pray any longer, being exhausted—able to do nothing but weep, which she did in utter exhaustion of joy. God had considered, and He had found it could be done, and had pity upon her. So she concluded, poor child! and dropped asleep in her turn a little while after, helpless and feeble with happiness. Poor child! on so small a foundation can hope found itself and comfort come.

On the same night Miss Susan went back again from Antwerp to London. She had a calm passage, which was well for her, for Miss Susan was not so sure that night of God's protection as Reine was, nor could she

appeal to Him for shelter against the winds and waves with the same confidence of being heard and taken care of as when she went from London to Antwerp. But happily the night was still, the moon shining as bright and clear upon that great wayward strait, the Channel, as she did upon the noiseless whiteness of the Doldenhorn; and about the same hour when Reine fell asleep, her relation did so also, lying somewhat nervous in her berth, and thinking that there was but a plank between her and eternity. She did not know of the happy change which Reine believed had taken place in the Alpine valley, any more than Reine knew in what darker transaction Miss Susan had become involved; and thus they met the future, one happy in wild hopes of what God had done for her, the other with a sombre confidence in what (she thought) she had managed for herself.

CHAPTER XI.

"REINE, is it long since you heard from Aunt Susan? Look here,—I don't want her tender little notes to the invalid. I am tired of always recollecting that I am an invalid. When one is dying one has enough of it, without always being reminded in one's correspondence. Is there no news? I want news. What does she say?"

"She speaks only of the Farrel-Austins—who had gone to see her," said Reine almost under her breath.

"Ah!" Herbert too showed a little change of sentiment at this name. Then he laughed faintly. "I don't know why I should mind," he said; "every man has a next-of-kin, I suppose, an heir-at-law, though every man does not die before his time like me. That's what makes it unpleasant, I suppose. Well, what about Farrel-Austin, Reine? There is no harm in him that I know."

"There is great harm in him," said Reine indignantly; "why did he go there to insult them, to make them

think? And I know there was something long ago that makes Aunt Susan hate him. She says Everard was there too—I think, with Kate and Sophy——"

"And you do not like that either?" said Herbert, putting his hand upon hers and looking at her with a smile.

"I do not mind," said Reine sedately. "Why should I mind? I do not think they are very good companions for Everard," she added, with that impressive look of mature wisdom which the most youthful countenance is fond of putting on by times; "but that is my only reason. He is not very settled in his mind."

"Are you settled in your mind, Reine?"

"I? I have nothing to unsettle me," she said with genuine surprise. "I am a girl; it is different. I can stop myself whenever I feel that I am going too far. You boys cannot stop yourselves," Reine added, with the least little shake of her pretty head; "that makes frivolous companions so bad for Everard. He will go on and on without thinking."

"He is a next-of-kin, too," said Herbert with a smile. "How strange a light it throws upon them all when one is dying! I wonder what they think about me, Reine! I wonder if they are always waiting, expecting every

day to bring them the news? I daresay Farrel-Austin has settled exactly what he is to do, and the changes he will make in the old house. He will be sure to make changes, if only to show that he is the master. The first great change of all will be when the White ladies themselves have to go away. Can you believe in the house without Aunt Susan, Reine? I think, for my part, it will drop to pieces; and Augustine praying against the window like a saint in painted glass. Do you know where they mean to go?"

"Herbert! you kill me when you ask me such questions."

"Because they all imply my own dying?" said Herbert. "Yes, my queen, I know. But just for the fun of the thing, tell me what do you think Farrel means to do? Will he meddle with the old almshouses, and show them all that *he* is Lord of the Manor and nobody else? or will he grudge the money and let Augustine keep possession of the family charities? That is what I think. He is fond of his money, and of making a good show with it, not feeding useless poor people. But then if he leaves the almshouses to her undisturbed, where will Augustine go? By Jove!" said Herbert, striking his feeble hand against his couch with the energy of a

new idea, "I should not be in the least surprised if she went and lived at the almshouses herself, like one of her own poor people; she would think, poor soul, that that would please God. I am more sorry for Aunt Susan," he added after a pause, "for she is not so simple; and she has been the squire so long, how will she ever bear to abdicate? It will be hard upon her, Reine."

Reine had turned away her head to conceal the bitter tears of disappointment that had rushed to her eyes. She had been so sure that he was better—and to be thrown thus back all at once upon this talk about his death was more than she could bear.

"Don't cry, dear," he said, "I am only discussing it for the fun of the thing; and to tell you the truth, Reine, I am keeping the chief point of the joke to myself all this time. I don't know what you will think when I tell you——"

"What, Bertie, what?"

"Don't be so anxious; I daresay it is utter nonsense. Lean down your ear that I may whisper; I am half-ashamed to say it aloud. Reine, hush! listen! Somehow I have got a strange feeling, just for a day or two, that I am not going to die at all, but to live."

"I am sure of it!" cried the girl falling on her knees

and throwing her arms round him. "I know it! It was last night. God did not make up His mind till last night. I felt it in the air. I felt it everywhere. Some angel put it into my head. For all this time I have been making up my mind, and giving you up, Bertie, till yesterday; something put it into my head—the thought was not mine, or I would not have any faith in it. Something said to me, God is thinking it all over again. Oh, I know! He would not let them tell you and me both unless it was true."

"Do you think so, Reine? do you really think so?" said the sick boy—for he was but a boy—with a sudden dew in his large liquid exhausted eyes. "I thought you would laugh at me—no, of course, I don't mean laugh—but think it a piece of folly. I thought it must be nonsense myself; but do you really, really think so too?"

The only answer she could make was to kiss him, dashing off her tears that they might not come upon his face; and the two kept silent for a moment, two young faces, close together, pale, one with emotion, the other with weakness, half-angelic in their pathetic youthfulness and the inspiration of this sudden hope, smiles upon their lips, tears in their eyes, and the trembling of a confidence too ethereal for common mortality in the two

hearts that beat so close together. There was something even in the utter unreasonableness of their hope which made it more touching, more pathetic still. The boy was less moved than the girl in his weakness, and in the patience which that long apprenticeship to dying had taught him. It was not so much to him who was going as to her who must remain.

"If it should be so," he said after a while, almost in a whisper, "oh, how good we ought to be, Reine! If I failed of my duty, if I did not do what God meant me to do in everything, if I took to thinking of myself—then it would be better that things had gone on—as they are going."

"As they were going, Bertie!"

"You think so, really; you think so? Don't just say it for my feelings, for I don't really mind. I was quite willing, you know, Reine."

Poor boy! already he had put his willingness in the past, unawares.

"Bertie," she said solemnly, "I don't know if you believe in the angels like me. Then tell me how this is; sometimes I have a thought in the morning which was not there at night; sometimes when I have been puzzling and wondering what to do—about you, perhaps,

about mamma, about one of the many, many things," said Reine with a celestial face of grave simplicity, "which perplex us in life,—and all at once I have had a thought which made everything clear. One moment quite in the dark, not seeing what to do; and the next, with a thought that made everything clear. Now, how did that come, Bertie? tell me. Not from me—it was put into my head, just as you pull my dress, or touch my arm, and whisper something to me in the dark. I always believe in things that are like this, *put into my head.*"

Was it wonderful that the boy was easy to convince by this fanciful argument, and took Reine's theory very seriously? He was in a state of weakened life and impassioned hope, when the mind is very open to such theories. When the mother came in to hear that Herbert was much better, and that he meant to go out in his wheeled-chair in the afternoon, even she could scarcely guard herself against a gleam of hope. He was certainly better. "For the moment, chérie," she said to Reine, who followed her out anxiously to have her opinion; "for the moment, yes, he is better; but we cannot look for anything permanent. Do not deceive yourself, ma Reine. It is not to be so."

"Why is it not to be so? when I am sure it is to be so; it shall be so!" cried Reine.

Madame de Mirfleur shook her head. "These rallyings are very deceitful," she said. "Often, as I told you, they mean only that the end is very near. Almost all those who die of lingering chronic illness, like our poor dear, have a last blaze-up in the socket, as it were, before the end. Do not trust to it; do not build any hopes upon it, Reine."

"But I do; but I will!" the girl said under her breath with a shudder. When her mother went into those medical details, which she was fond of, Reine shrank always, as if from a blow.

"Yet it is possible that it might be more than a momentary rally," said Madame de Mirfleur. "I am disposed almost to hope so. The perforation may be arrested for the time by this beautiful air and the scent of the pines. God grant it! The doctors have always said it was possible. We must take the greatest care, especially of his nourishment, Reine; and if I leave you for a little while alone with him——"

"Are you going away, mamma?" said Reine, with a guilty thrill of pleasure which she rebuked and heartily tried to cast out from her mind; for had not she pledged

herself to be good, to bear everything, never to suffer a thought that was unkind to enter her mind, if only Herbert might recover? She dared not risk that healing by permitting within her any movement of feeling that was less than tender and kind. She stopped accordingly and changed her tone, and repeated with eagerness, "Mamma, do you think of going away?" Madame de Mirfleur felt that there was a difference in the tone with which these two identical sentences were spoken; but she was not nearly enough in sympathy with her daughter to divine what that difference meant.

"If Herbert continues to get better—and if the doctor thinks well of him when he comes to-morrow—I think I will venture to return home for a little while, to see how everything is going on." Madame de Mirfleur was half apologetic in her tone. "I am not like you, Reine," she said, kissing her daughter's cheek, "I have so many things to think of; I am torn in so many pieces; dear Herbert here; the little ones là-bas; and my husband. What a benediction of God is this relief in the midst of our anxiety, if it will but last! Chérie, if the doctor thinks as we do, I will leave you with François to take care of my darling boy, while I go and see that all is going well in Normandy. See! I was afraid to hope;

and now your hope, ma Reine, has overcome me and stolen into my heart."

Yesterday this speech would have roused one of the devils who tempted her in Reine's thoughts—and even now the evil impulse swelled upwards and struggled for the mastery, whispering that Madame de Mirfleur was thinking more of the home "là-bas," than of poor Herbert; that she was glad to seize the opportunity to get away, and a hundred other evil things. Reine grew crimson, her mother could not tell why. It was with her struggle, poor child, to overcome this wicked thought and to cast from her mind all interpretations of her mother's conduct except the kindest one. The girl grew red with the effort she made to hold fast by her pledge and resist all temptation. It was better to let her mind be a blank without thought at all, than to allow evil thoughts to come in after she had promised to God to abandon them. I do not think Reine had any idea that she was paying a price for Herbert's amendment by "being good," as she had vowed in her simplicity to be. It was gratitude, profound and trembling, that the innocent soul within her longed to express by this means; but still I think all unawares she had a feeling—which made her determination to be good still more patheti-

cally strong—that perhaps if God saw her gratitude and her purpose fail, He might be less disposed to continue His great blessings to one so forgetful of them. Thus, as constantly happens in human affairs, the generous sense of gratitude longing to express itself, mingled with that secret fear of being found wanting, which lies at the bottom of every heart. Reine could not disentangle them any more than I can, or any son of Adam; but fortunately, she was less aware of the mixture than we are who look on.

"Yes, mamma," she answered at length, with a meekness quite unusual to her, "I am sure you must want to see the little ones; it is only natural." This was all that Reine could manage to stammer forth.

"N'est ce pas?" said the mother pleased, though she could not read her daughter's thoughts, with this acknowledgment of the rights and claims of her other children. Madame de Mirfleur loved to *ménager*, and was fond of feeling herself to be a woman disturbed with many diverse cares, and generally sacrificing herself to some one of them; but she had a great deal of natural affection, and was glad to have something like a willing assent on the part of her troublesome girl to the "other ties," which she was herself too much disposed to bring

in on all occasions. She kissed Reine very affectionately, and went off again to write to her husband a description of the change. "He is better, unquestionably better," she said. "At first I feared it was the last gleam before the end; but I almost hope now it may be something more lasting. Ah, if my poor Herbert be but spared, what a benediction for all of us, and his little brothers and sisters! I know you will not be jealous, mon cher ami, of my love for my boy. If the doctor thinks well I shall leave this frightful village to-morrow and be with thee as quickly as I can travel. What happiness, bon Dieu, to see our own house again!" She added in a P.S., "Reine is very amiable to me; hope and happiness, mon ami, are better for some natures than sorrow. She is so much softer and humbler since her brother was better." Poor Reine! Thus it will be perceived that Madame de Mirfleur, like most of her nation, was something of a philosopher too.

When Reine was left alone she did not even then make any remark to herself upon mamma's eagerness to get away to her children, whose very names on ordinary occasions the girl disliked to hear. To punish and school herself now she recalled them deliberately. Jeanot and Camille and little Babette, all French to

their finger-tips, spoilt children, whose ears the English sister, herself trained in nursery proprieties under Miss Susan's rule, had longed to box many times. She resolved now to buy some of the carved wood which haunts the traveller at every corner in Switzerland for them, and be very good to them when she saw them again. Oh, how good Reine meant to be! Tender visions of an ideal purity arose in her mind. Herbert and she—the one raised from the brink of the grave, the other still more blessed in receiving him from that shadow of death—how could they ever be good enough, gentle enough, kind enough, to show their gratitude? Reine's young soul seemed to float in a very heaven of gentler meanings, of peace with all men, of charity and tenderness. Never, she vowed to herself, should poor man cross her path without being the better for it; never a tear fall that she could dry. Herbert, when she went to him, was much of the same mind. He had begun to believe in himself and in life, with all those unknown blessings which the boy had sweetly relinquished, scarcely knowing them, but which now seemed to come back fluttering about his head on sunny wings, like the swallows returning with the summer. Herbert was younger even than his years, in heart, at least—in consequence

of his long ill-health and seclusion, and the entire retirement from a boy's ordinary pursuits which that had made necessary; and I do not think that he had ever ventured to realise warmly, as in his feebleness he was now doing, through that visionary tender light which is the prerogative of youth, all the beauty and brightness and splendour of life. Heretofore he had turned his eyes from it, knowing that his doom had gone forth, and with a gentle philosophy avoided the sight of that which he could never enjoy. But lo! now, an accidental improvement, or what might prove but an accidental improvement, acting upon a fantastic notion of Reine's, had placed him all at once, to his own consciousness, in the position of a rescued man. He was not much like a man rescued, but rather one trembling already at the gates of death, as he crept downstairs on François's arm to his chair. The other travellers in the place stood by respectfully to let him pass, and lingered after he had passed, looking after him with pity and low comments to each other. "Not long for this world," said one and another shaking their heads; while Herbert, poor fellow, feeling his wheel-chair to be something like a victor's car, held his sister's hand as they went slowly along the road towards the waterfall, and talked to her of what they

should do when they got home. It might have been heaven they were going to instead of Whiteladies, so bright were their beautiful young resolutions, their innocent plans. They meant, you may be sure, to make a heaven on earth of their Berkshire parish, to turn Whiteladies into a celestial palace and House Beautiful, and to be good as two children, as good as angels. How beautiful to them was the village road, the mountain stream running strong under the bridge, the waves washing on the pebbly edge, the heather and herbage that encroached upon the smoothness of the way! "We must not go to the waterfall, it is too far and the road is rough; but we will rest here a little where the air comes through the pines. It is as pretty here as anywhere," said Reine. "Pretty! you mean it is beautiful; everything is beautiful," said Herbert, who had not been out of doors before since his arrival, lying back in his chair and looking at the sky, across which some flimsy cloudlets were floating. It chilled Reine somehow in the midst of her joy, to see how naturally his eyes turned to the sky.

"Never mind the clouds, Bertie dear," she said hastily, "look down the valley, how beautiful it is; or let François turn the chair round, and then you can see the mountains."

"Must I give up the sky then as if I had nothing more to do with it?" said Herbert with a boyish, pleasant laugh. Even this speech made Reine tremble; for might not God perhaps think that they were taking Him too quickly at his word and making too sure?

"The great thing," she said, eluding the question, "is to be near the pines; everybody says the pines are so good. Let them breathe upon you, Bertie, and make you strong."

"At their pleasure," said Herbert smiling and turning his pale head towards the strong trees, murmuring with odorous breath overhead. The sunshine glowed and burned upon their great red trunks, and the dark foliage which stood close and gave forth no reflection. The bees filled the air with a continuous hum, which seemed the very voice of the warm afternoon, of the sunshine which brought forth every flimsy insect and grateful flower among the grass. Herbert sat listening in silence for some time, in that beatitude of gentle emotion which after danger is over is so sweet to the sufferer. "Sing me something, Reine," he said at last, in the caprice of that delightful mood. Reine was seated on a stone by the side of the road, with a broad hat shading her eyes, and a white parasol over her head. She did not wait to

be asked a second time. What would not she have done at Herbert's wish? She looked at him tenderly where he sat in his chair under the shadow of a kindly pine which seemed to have stepped out of the wood on purpose—and without more ado began to sing. Many a time had she sang to him when her heart was sick to death, and it took all her strength to form the notes; but to-day Reine's soul was easy and at home, and she could put all her heart into it. She sang the little air that Everard Austin had whistled as he came through the green lanes towards Whiteladies, making Miss Susan's heart glad :—

"Ce que je désire, et que j'aime,
C'est toujours toi,
De mon âme le bien suprême
C'est encore toi, c'est encore toi."

Some village children came and made a little group round them listening, and the tourists in the village, much surprised, gathered about the bridge to listen too, wondering. Reine did not mind; she was singing for Herbert, no one else; and what did it matter who might be near?

CHAPTER XII.

HERBERT continued much better next day. It had done him good to be out, and already François, with that confidence in all simple natural remedies which the French, and indeed all continental nations, have so much more strongly than we, asserted boldly that it was the pines which had already done so much for his young master. I do not think that Reine and Herbert, being half English, had much faith in the pines. They referred the improvement at once, and directly, to a higher hand, and were glad, poor children, to think that no means had been necessary, but that God had done it simply by willing it, in that miraculous, simple way which seems so natural to the primitive soul. The doctor, when he came next day upon his weekly visit from Thun or Interlaken, was entirely taken by surprise. I believe that from week to week he had scarcely expected to see his patient living; and now he was up, and out, coming back to something like appetite and ease, and as full of

hope as youth could be. The doctor shook his head, but was soon infected, like the others, by this atmosphere of hopefulness. He allowed that a wonderful progress had been made; that there always were special circumstances in this case which made it unlike other cases, and left a margin for unexpected results. And when Madame de Mirfleur took him aside to ask about the state of the tissue, and whether the perforations were arrested, he still said, though with hesitation and shakings of the head, that he could not say that it might not be the beginning of a permanently favourable turn in the disease, or that healing processes might not have set in. "Such cases are very unlikely," he said. "They are of the nature of miracles, and we are very reluctant to believe in them; but still at M. Austin's age, it is impossible to deny that results utterly unexpected happen sometimes. Sometimes, at rare intervals; and no one can calculate upon them. It might be that it was really the commencement of a permanent improvement; and nothing can be better for him than the hopeful state of mind in which he is."

"Then, M. le docteur," said Madame de Mirfleur, anxiously, "you think I may leave him? You think I may go and visit my husband and my little

ones, for a little time — a very little time — without fear?"

"Nothing is impossible," said the doctor, "nor can I guarantee anything till we see how M. Austin goes on. If the improvement continues for a week or two——"

"But I shall be back in a week or two," said the woman, whose heart was torn asunder, in a tone of dismay; and at length she managed to extort from the doctor something which she took for a permission. It was not she loved Herbert less—but perhaps it was natural that she should love the babies, and the husband whose name she bore, and who had separated her from the life to which the other family belonged—more. Madame de Mirfleur did not enter into any analysis of her feelings, as she hurried in a flutter of pleasant excitement to pack her necessaries for the home journey. Reine, always dominated by that tremulous determination to be good at any cost, carefully refrained also, but with more difficulty, from any questioning with herself about her mother's sentiments. She made the best of it to Herbert, who was somewhat surprised that his mother should leave him, having acquired that confidence of the sick in the fact of their own importance, to which everything must give way. He was not wounded, being too

certain, poor boy, of being the first object in his little circle, but he was surprised.

"Reflect, Herbert, mamma has other people to think of. There are the little ones; little children are constantly having measles, and colds, and indigestions; and then, M. de Mirfleur——"

"I thought you disliked to think of M. de Mirfleur, Reine."

"Ah! so I do; but, Bertie, I have been very unkind. I have hated him, and been angry with mamma, without reason. It seems to be natural to some people to marry," said the girl, after a pause, "and we ought not to judge them; it is not wrong to wish that one's mother belonged to one, that she did not belong to other people, is it? But that is all. Mamma thought otherwise. Bertie, we were little, and we were so much away in England. Six months in the year, fancy; and then she must have been lonely. We do not take these things into account when we are children," said Reine; "but after, when we can think, many things become clear."

It was thus with a certain grandeur of indulgence and benevolence that the two young people saw their mother go away. That she should have a husband and children at all was a terrible infringement of the ideal, and

brought her down unquestionably to a lower level in their primitive world; but granting the husband and the children, as it was necessary to do, no doubt she had, upon that secondary level, a certain duty to them. They bade her good-bye tenderly, their innate disapproval changing, with their altered moral view, from irritation and disappointment into a condescending sweetness. "Poor mamma! I do not see that it was possible for her to avoid going," Reine said; and perhaps, after all, it was this disapproved of, and by no means ideal mother, who felt the separation most keenly when the moment came. When a woman takes a second life upon her, no doubt she must resign herself to give up something of the sweetness of the first; and it would be demanding too much of human nature to expect that the girl and boy, who were fanciful and even fantastic in their poetical and visionary youth, could be as reverent of their mother as if she had altogether belonged to them. Men and women, I fear, will never be equal in this world, were all conventional and outside bonds removed to-morrow. The widower-father does not descend from any pedestal when he forms what Madame de Mirfleur called "new ties," as does the widow-mother; and it will be a strange world, when, if ever,

we come to expect no more from women than we do from men; it being granted, sure enough, that in other ways more is to be expected from men than from women. Herbert sat in his chair on the balcony to see her go away, smiling and waving his thin hand to his mother; and Reine, at the carriage-door, kissed her blandly, and watched her drive off with a tender patronising sense that it was quite natural. But the mother, poor woman, though she was eager to get away, and had "other ties" awaiting her, looked at them through eyes half blinded with tears, and felt a pang of inferiority of which she had never before been sensible. She was not an ideal personage, but she felt, without knowing how, the loss of her position, and that descent from the highest, by which she had purchased her happiness. These momentary sensations would be a great deal more hard upon us if we could define them to ourselves, as you and I, dear reader, can define them when we see them thus going on before us; but fortunately few people have the gift to do this in their own case. So that Madame de Mirfleur only knew that her heart was wrung with pain to leave her boy, who might be dying still, notwithstanding his apparent improvement. And, by-and-by, as her home became nearer, and Herbert farther

off, the balance turned involuntarily, and she felt only how deep must be her own maternal tenderness when the pang of leaving Herbert could thus overshadow her pleasure in the thought of meeting all the rest.

Reine came closer to her brother when she went back to him, with a sense that if she had not been trying with all her might to be good, she would have felt injured and angry at her mother's desertion. "I don't know so much as mamma, but I know how to take care of you, Bertie," she said, smoothing back the hair from his forehead, with that low caressing coo of tenderness which mothers use to their children.

"You have always been my nurse, Reine," he said gratefully,—then after a pause—"and by-and-by I mean to require no nursing, but to take care of you."

And thus they went out again, feeling half happy, half forsaken, but gradually grew happier and happier, as once more the air from the pines blew about Herbert's head; and he got out of his chair on François's arm and walked into the wood, trembling a little in his feebleness, but glad beyond words, and full of infinite hope. It was the first walk he had taken, and Reine magnified it, till it came to look, as Bertie said, as if he had crossed the pass without a guide, and was the

greatest pedestrian in all the Kanderthal. He sat up to dinner, after a rest; and how they laughed over it, and talked, projecting expeditions of every possible and impossible kind, to which the Gemmi was nothing, and feeling their freedom from all comment, and happy privilege of being as foolish as they pleased! Grave François even smiled at them as he served their simple meal; "Enfants!" he said, as they burst into soft peals of laughter—unusual and delicious laughter, which had sounded so sick and faint in the chamber to which death seemed always approaching. They had the heart to laugh now, these two young creatures, alone in the world. But François did not object to their laughter, or think it indecorous, by reason of the strong faith he had in the pines, which seemed to him, after so many things that had been tried in vain, at last the real cure.

Thus they went on for a week or more, after Madame de Mirfleur left them, as happy as two babies, doing (with close regard to Herbert's weakness and necessities) what seemed good in their own eyes—going out daily, sitting in the balcony, watching the parties of pilgrims who came and went, amusing themselves (now that the French mother was absent, before whom neither boy

nor girl would betray that their English country-folks were less than perfect) over the British tourists with their alpenstocks. Such of these same tourists as lingered in the valley grew very tender of the invalid and his sister, happily unaware that Reine laughed at them. They said to each other, "He is looking much better," and, "What a change in a few days!" and, "Please God, the poor young fellow will come round after all." The ladies would have liked to go and kiss Reine, and God bless her for a good girl devoted to her sick brother; and the men would have been fain to pat Herbert on the shoulder, and bid him keep a good heart, and get well, to reward his pretty sister, if for nothing else; while all the time the boy and girl, Heaven help them, made fun of the British tourists from their balcony, and felt themselves as happy as the day was long, fear and the shadow of death having melted quite away.

I am loth to break upon this gentle time, or show how their hopes came to nothing; or at least sank for the time in deeper darkness than ever. One sultry afternoon the pair sallied forth with the intention of staying in the pine-wood a little longer than usual, as Herbert daily grew stronger. It was very hot, not a leaf astir, and

insupportable in the little rooms, where all the walls were baked, and the sun blazing upon the closed shutters. Once under the pines, there would be nature and air, and there they could stay till the sun was setting; for no harm could come to the tenderest invalid on such a day. But as the afternoon drew on, ominous clouds appeared over the snow of the hills, and before preparations could be made to meet it one of the sudden storms of mountainous countries broke upon the Kanderthal. Deluges of rain swept down from the sky, an hour ago so blue, rain and hail in great solid drops like stones beating against the wayfarer. When it was discovered that the brother and sister were out of doors, the little inn was in an immediate commotion. One sturdy British tourist, most laughable of all, who had just returned with a red face, peeled and smarting, from a long walk in the sun, rushed at the only mule that was to be had, and harnessed it himself, wildly swearing (may it be forgiven him!) unintelligible oaths, into the only covered vehicle in the place, and lashed the brute into a reluctant gallop, jolting on the shaft or running by the side in such a state of redness and moisture as is possible only to an Englishman of sixteen stone weight. They huddled Herbert, faintly smiling his thanks, and Reine, trembling

and drenched, and deadly pale, into the rude carriage, and jolted them back over the stony road, the British tourist rushing on in advance to order brandy and water enough to have drowned Herbert. But, alas ! the harm was done. It is a long way to Thun from the Kanderthal, but the doctor was sent for, and the poor lad had every attention that in such a place it was possible to give him. Reine went back to her seat by the bedside with a change as from life to death in her face. She would not believe it when the doctor spoke to her, gravely shaking his head once more, and advised that her mother should be sent for. "You must not be alone," he said, looking at her pitifully, and in his heart wondering what kind of stuff the mother was made of who could leave such a pair of children in such circumstances. He had taken Reine out of the room to say this to her, and to add that he would himself telegraph, as soon as he got back to Thun, for Madame de Mirfleur. "One cannot tell what may happen within the next twenty-four hours," said the doctor, "and you must not be alone." Then poor Reine's pent-up soul burst forth. What was the use of being good, of trying so hard, so hard, as she had done, to make the best of everything, to blame no one, to be tender, and kind,

and charitable? She had tried, O Heaven, with all her heart and might; and this was what it had come back to again!

"Oh, don't! don't!" she cried, in sharp anguish. "No; let me have him all to myself. I love him. No one else does. Oh, let her alone! She has her husband and her children. She was glad when my Bertie was better, that she might go to them. Why should she come back now? What is he to her? the last, the farthest off, less dear than the baby, not half so much to her as her house and her husband, and all the new things she cares for. But he is everything to me, all I have, and all I want. Oh, let us alone! let us alone!"

"Dear young lady," said the compassionate doctor, "your grief is too much for you; you don't know what you say."

"Oh, I know! I know!" cried Reine. "She was glad he was better, that she might go; that was all she thought of. Don't send for her; I could not bear to see her. She will say she knew it all the time, and blame you for letting her go—though you know she longed to go. Oh, let me have him to myself! I care for nothing else—nothing now—nothing in the world!"

"You must not say so; you will kill yourself," said the doctor.

"Oh, I wish, I wish I could; that would be the best. If *you* would only kill me with Bertie! but you have not the courage—you dare not. Then, doctor, leave us together—leave us alone, brother and sister. I have no one but him, and he has no one but me. Mamma is married; she has others to think of; leave my Bertie to me. I know how to nurse him, doctor," said Reine, clasping her hands. "I have always done it, since I was *so* high; he is used to me, and he likes me best. Oh, let me have him all to myself!"

These words went to the hearts of those who heard them; and, indeed, there were on the landing several persons waiting who heard them—some English ladies, who had stopped in their journey out of pity to "be of use to the poor young creature," they said; and the landlady of the inn, who was waiting outside to hear how Herbert was. The doctor, who was a compassionate man, as doctors usually are, gave them what satisfaction he could; but that was very small. He said he would send for the mother, of course; but, in the meantime, recommended that no one should interfere with Reine unless "something should happen." "Do you think

it likely anything should happen before you come back?" asked one of the awe-stricken women. But the doctor only shook his head, and said he could answer for nothing; but that in case anything happened, one of them should take charge of Reine. More than one kind-hearted stranger in the little inn kept awake that night, thinking of the poor forlorn girl and dying boy, whose touching union had been noted by all the village. The big Englishman who had brought them home out of the storm, cried like a baby in the coffee-room as he told to some new-comers how Reine had sat singing songs to her brother, and how the poor boy had mended, and begun to look like life again. "If it had not been for this accursed storm!" cried the good man, upon which one of the new arrivals rebuked him. There was little thought of in the village that night but the two young Englanders, without their mother, or a friend near them. But when the morning came, Herbert still lived; he lived through that dreary day upon the little strength he had acquired during his temporary improvement. During this terrible time Reine would not leave him except by moments now and then, when she would go out on the balcony and look up blank and tearless to the skies, which were so bright again. Ah! why were

they bright, after all the harm was done? Had they covered themselves with clouds, it would have been more befitting, after all they had brought about. I cannot describe the misery in Reine's heart. It was something more, something harder and more bitter than grief. She had a bewildered sense that God himself had wronged her, making her believe something which He did not mean to come true. How could she pray? She had prayed once, and had been answered, she thought, and then cast aside, and all her happiness turned into woe. If He had said No at first it would have been hard enough, but she could have borne it; but He had seemed to grant, and then had withdrawn the blessing; He had mocked her with a delusive reply. Poor Reine felt giddy in the world, having lost the centre of it, the soul of it, the God to whom she could appeal. She had cast herself rashly upon this ordeal by fire, staked her faith of every day, her child's confidence, upon a miracle, and, holding out her hand for it, had found it turn to nothing. She stood dimly looking out from the balcony on the third night after Herbert's relapse. The stars were coming out in the dark sky, and to anybody but Reine, who observed nothing external, the wind was cold. She stood in a kind of trance, saying nothing,

feeling the wind blow upon her with the scent of the pines, which made her sick; and the stars looked coldly at her, friends no longer, but alien inquisitive lights peering out of an unfriendly heaven. Herbert lay in an uneasy sleep, weary and restless as are the dying, asking in his dreams to be raised up, to have the window opened, to get more air. Restless, too, with the excitement upon her of what was coming, she had wandered out, blank to all external sounds and sights, not for the sake of the air, but only to relieve the misery which nothing relieved. She did not even notice the carriage coming along the darkening road, which the people at the inn were watching eagerly, hoping that it brought the mother. Reine was too much exhausted by this time to think even of her mother. She was still standing in the same attitude, neither hearing nor noticing, when the carriage drew up at the door. The excitement of the inn people had subsided, for it had been apparent for some time that the inmate of the carriage was a man. He jumped lightly down at the door, a young man light of step and of heart, but paused, and looked up at the figure in the balcony, which stood so motionless, seeming to watch him. "Ah, Reine! is it you? I came off at once to congratulate you," he said, in his cheery

English voice. It was Everard Austin, who had heard of Herbert's wonderful amendment, and had come on at once, impulsive and sanguine, to take part in their joy. That was more in his way than consoling suffering, though he had a kind heart.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS SUSAN'S absence from home had been a very short one—she left and returned within the week; and during this time matters went on very quietly at Whiteladies. The servants had their own way in most things—they gave Miss Augustine her spare meals when they pleased, though Martha, left in charge, stood over her to see that she ate something. But Stevens stood upon no ceremony—he took off his coat and went into the garden, which was his weakness, and there enjoyed a carnival of digging and dibbling, until the gardener grumbled, who was not disposed to have his plants meddled with.

"He has been a touching of my geraniums," said this functionary; "what do *he* know about a garden? Do you ever see me a poking of myself into the pantry a cleaning of his spoons?"

"No, bless you," said the cook; "nobody don't see

you a putting of your hand to work as you ain't forced to. You know better, Mr. Smithers."

"That ain't it, that ain't it," said Smithers, somewhat discomfited; and he went out forthwith, and made an end of the amateur. "Either it's my garden, or it ain't," said the man of the spade; "if it is, you'll get out o' that in ten minutes' time. I can't be bothered with fellers here as don't know the difference between a petuniar and a nasty choking rubbish of a bindweed."

"You might speak a little more civil to them as helps you," said Stevens, humbled by an unfortunate mistake he had made; but still not without some attempt at self-assertion.

"Help! you wait till I asks you for your help," said the gardener. And thus Stevens was driven back to his coat, his pantry, and the proprieties of life, before Miss Susan's return.

As for Augustine, she gathered her poor people round her in the Almshouse chapel every morning, and said her prayers among the pensioners, whom she took so much pains to guide in their devotion, for the benefit of her family and the expiation of their sins. The poor people in the Almshouses were not perhaps more pious than any other equal number of people in the village;

but they all hobbled to their seats in the chapel, and said their Amens, led by Josiah Tolladay—who had been parish clerk in his day, and pleased himself in this shadow of his ancient office—with a certain fervour. Some of them grumbled, as who does not grumble at a set duty, whatever it may be? but I think the routine of the daily service was rather a blessing to most of them, giving them a motive for exerting themselves, for putting on clean caps, and brushing their old coats. The Alms-houses lay near the entrance of the village of St. Austin's, a square of old red-brick houses, built two hundred years ago, with high dormer windows, and red walls, mellowed into softness by age. They had been suffered to fall into decay by several generations of Austins, but had been restored to thorough repair and to their original use by Miss Augustine, who had added a great many conveniences and advantages, unthought of in former days, to the little cottages, and had done everything that could be done to make the lives of her bedesmen and bedeswomen agreeable. She was great herself on the duty of self-denial, fasted much, and liked to punish her delicate and fragile outer woman, which, poor soul, had little strength to spare; but she petted her pensioners, and made a great deal of their little ailments, and kept

the cook at Whiteladies constantly occupied for them, making dainty dishes to tempt the appetites of old humbugs of both sexes, who could eat their own plain food very heartily when this kind and foolish lady was out of the way. She was so ready to indulge them, that old Mrs. Tolladay was quite right in calling the gentle foundress, the abstract, self-absorbed, devotional creature, whose life was dedicated to prayer for her family, a great temptation to her neighbours. Miss Augustine was so anxious to make up for all her grandfathers and grandmothers had not done, and to earn a pardon for their misdeeds, that she could deny nothing to her poor. The Almshouses formed a square of tiny cottages, with a large garden in the midst, which absorbed more plants, the gardener said, than all the gardens at Whiteladies. The entrance from the road was through a gateway, over which was a clock-tower; and in this part of the building were situated the pretty quaint little rooms occupied by the chaplain. Right opposite, at the other end of the garden, was the chapel; and all the houses opened upon the garden, which was pretty and bright with flowers, with a large grassplot in the midst, and a fine old mulberry tree, under which the old people would sit and bask in the sun-

shine. There were about thirty of them, seven or eight houses on each side of the square—a large number to be maintained by one family : but I suppose the first Austins had entertained a due sense of their own wickedness, and felt that no small price was required to buy them off. Many of their comforts, however, were innovations made at Miss Augustine's charge. The endowment was in land, and in a situation where land rises comparatively little in value, so that it was not more than enough for the bare wants of so large a number of pensioners—and at least half of the houses had been left vacant, and falling into decay in the time of the late Squire and his father. It had been the enterprise of Miss Augustine's life to set this family charity fully forth again, according to the ordinance of the first founder, and almost all her fortune was dedicated to that and to the new freak of the Chantry. She had chosen her poor people herself from the village and neighbourhood, and perhaps on the whole they were not badly chosen. She had selected the chaplain herself, a quaint prim little old man, with a wife not unlike himself, who fitted into the rooms in the tower, and whose object in life for their first two years had been to smooth down Miss

Augustine, and keep her within the limits of good sense. Happily they had given that over before the time at which this story commences, and now contented themselves with their particular mission to the old alms-people themselves. These were enough to give them full occupation. They were partly old couples, husband and wife, and partly widows and single people; and they were as various in their characteristics as every group of human persons are, "a sad handful," as old Mrs. Tolladay said. Dr. Richard and his wife had enough to do to keep them in order, what with Miss Augustine's vagaries, and what with the peculiarities of the Austin pensioners themselves.

The two principal sides of the square, facing each other—the gate side and the chapel side—had each a faction of its own. The chapel side was led by old Mrs. Matthews, who was the most prayerful woman in the community, or at least had the credit among her own set of being so—the gate side, by Sarah Storton, once the laundress at Whiteladies, who was, I fear, a very mundane personage, and did not hesitate to speak her mind to Miss Augustine herself. Old Mrs. Tolladay lived on the south side, and was the critic and historian, or bard, of both the factions. She

was the wife of the old clerk, who rang the chapel bell, and led with infinite self-importance the irregular fire of Amens, which was so trying to Dr. Richard; but many of the old folks were deaf, and not a few stupid, and how could they be expected to keep time in the responses? Old Mrs. Matthews, who had been a Methodist once upon a time, and still was suspected of proclivities towards chapel, would groan now and then, without any warning, in the middle of the service, making Dr. Richard, whose nerves were sensitive, jump; and on summer days, when the weather was hot, and the chapel close and drowsy, one of the old men would indulge in an occasional snore, quickly strangled by his helpmate—which had a still stronger effect on the Doctor's nerves. John Simmons, who had no wife to wake him, was the worst offender on such occasions. He lived on the north side, in the darkest and coldest of all the cottages, and would drop his head upon his old breast, and doze contentedly, filling the little chapel with audible indications of his beatific repose. Once Miss Augustine herself had risen from her place, and walking solemnly down the chapel, in the midst of the awe-stricken people, had awakened John, taking her slim white hand out of her long

sleeves, and making him start with a cold touch upon his shoulder. "It will be best to stay away out of God's house if you cannot join in our prayers," Miss Augustine had said, words which in his fright and compunction the old man did not understand. He thought he was to be turned out of his poor little cold cottage, which was a palace to him, and awaited the next Monday, on which he received his weekly pittance from the chaplain, with terrified expectation. "Be I to go, sir?" said old John, trembling in all his old limbs; for he had but "the House" before him as an alternative, and the reader knows what a horror that alternative is to most poor folks.

"Miss Augustine has said nothing about it," said Dr. Richard; "but, John, you must not snore in church; if you will sleep, which is very reprehensible, why should you snore, John?"

"It's my misfortune, sir," said the old man. "I was always a snoring sleeper, God forgive me; there's many a one, as you say, sir, as can take his nap quiet, and no one know nothing about it: but, Doctor, I don't mean no harm, and it ain't my fault."

"You must take care not to sleep, John," said Dr.

Richard, shaking his head, "that is the great thing. You'll not snore if you don't sleep."

"I donnow that," said John doubtfully, taking up his shillings. The old soul was hazy, and did not quite know what he was blamed for. Of all the few enjoyments he had, that summer doze in the warm atmosphere was perhaps the sweetest. Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care—John felt it was one of the best things in this world, though he did not know what any idle book had said.

At nine o'clock every morning Josiah Tolladay sallied out of his cottage, with the key of the chapel, opened the door, and began to tug at the rope, which dangled so temptingly just out of reach of the children, when they came to see their grandfathers and grandmothers at the Almshouses. The chapel was not a very good specimen of architecture, having been built in the seventeenth century; and the bell which Josiah Tolladay rung was not much of a bell; but still it marked nine o'clock to the village, the clergyman of the parish being a quiet and somewhat indolent person, who had, up to this time, resisted the movement in favour of daily services. Tolladay kept on ringing while the old people stumbled past him into their benches,

and the Doctor went by, in his surplice, and little Mrs. Richard in her little trim bonnet—till Miss Augustine came along the path from the gate like a figure in a procession, with her veil on her head in summer, and her hood in winter, and with her hands folded into her long hanging sleeves. Miss Augustine always came alone, a solitary figure in the sunshine, and walked abstracted and solemn across the garden, and up the length of the chapel to the seat which was left for her on one side of the altar rails. Mrs. Richard had a place on the other side, but Miss Augustine occupied a sort of stall, slightly raised, and very visible to all the congregation. The Austin arms were on this stall, a sign of proprietorship not perhaps quite in keeping with the humble meaning of the chapel ; and Miss Augustine had blazoned it with a legend in very ecclesiastical red and blue—"Pray for us," translated, with laudable intentions, out of the Latin, in order to be understood by the congregation, but sent back into obscurity by the church decorator, whose letters were far too good art to be comprehensible. The old women, blinking under their old dingy bonnets, which some of them still insisted upon wearing "in the fashion," with here and there a tumbled red and yellow rose, notwithstanding

all that Mrs. Richard could say; and the old men with their heads sunk into the shabby collars of their old coats, sitting tremulous upon the benches, over which Miss Augustine could look from her high seat, immediately finding out any defaulter—were a pitiful assemblage enough, in that unloveliness of age and weakness which the very poor have so little means of making beautiful; but they were not without interest, nor their own quaint humour had any one there been of the mind to discover it. Of this view of the assemblage I need not say Miss Augustine was quite unconscious; her ear caught Mrs. Matthews's groan of unction with a sense of happiness, and she was pleased by the fervour of the dropping Amen, which made poor Dr. Richard so nervous. She did not mind the painful fact that at least a minute elapsed between Josiah Tolladay's clerkly solemnity of response and the fitful gust with which John Simmons in the background added his assisting voice. Miss Augustine was too much absorbed in her own special interests to be a Ritualist or not a Ritualist, or to think at all of Church politics. She was confused in her theology, and determined to have her family prayed for, and their sins expiated, without asking herself whether it was release from purgatory which she

anticipated as the answer to her prayers, or simply a turning aside of the curse for the future. I think the idea in her mind was quite confused, and she neither knew nor was at any trouble to ascertain exactly what she meant. Accordingly, though many people, and the vicar himself among them, thought Miss Augustine to be of the highest sect of the High Church, verging upon Popery itself, Miss Augustine in reality found more comfort in the Dissenting fervour of the old woman who was a "Methody," than in the most correct church worship. What she wanted, poor soul, was that semi-commercial, semi-visionary traffic, in which not herself but her family were to be the gainers. She was a merchant organizing this bargain with Heaven, the nature of which she left vague even to herself; and those who aided her with most apparent warmth of supplications were the people whom she most appreciated, with but little regard to the fashion of their exertions. John Simmons, when he snored, was like a workman shirking work to Miss Augustine. But even Dr. Richard and his wife had not fathomed this downright straightforward business temper which existed without her own knowledge, or any one else's, in the strange visionary being with whom they had to do.

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She, indeed, put her meaning simply into so many words, but it was impossible for those good people to take her at her own word, and to believe that she expressed all she meant, and nothing less or more.

There was a little prayer used in the almshouse chapel for the family of the founder, which Dr. Richard had consented, with some difficulty, to add after the collects at morning and evening service, and which he had a strong impression was uncanonical and against the rubrics, employing it, so to speak, under protest, and explaining to every chance stranger that it was "a tradition of the place from time immemorial."

"I suppose we are not at liberty to change lightly any ancient use," said the chaplain, "at least such was the advice of my excellent friend the Bishop of the Leeward Islands, in whose judgment I have great confidence. I have not yet had an opportunity of laying the matter before the bishop of my own diocese, but I have little doubt his lordship will be of the same opinion."

With this protestation of faith, which I think was much stronger than Dr. Richard felt, the chaplain used the prayer; but he maintained a constant struggle against Miss Augustine, who would have had him add

sentences to it from time to time, as various family exigencies arose. On one of the days of Miss Susan's absence a thought of this kind came into her sister's head. Augustine felt that Susan being absent, and travelling, and occupied with her business, whatever it was, might perhaps omit to read the lessons for the day, as was usual, or would be less particular in her personal devotions. She thought this over all evening, and dreamt of it at night; and in the morning she sent a letter to the chaplain as soon as she woke, begging him to add to his prayer for the founder's family the words, "and for such among them as may be specially exposed to temptation this day." Dr. Richard took a very strong step on this occasion—he refused to do it. It was a great thing for a man to do, the comfort of whose remnant of life hung upon the pleasure of his patroness; but he knew it was an illegal liberty to take with his service, and he would not do it. Miss Augustine was very self-absorbed, and very much accustomed (though she thought otherwise) to have everything her own way, and when she perceived that this new petition of hers was not added to the prayer for her family, she disregarded Josiah Tolladay's clerkly leading of the responses even more than John Simmons

did. She made a little pause, and repeated it herself, in an audible voice, and then said her Amen, keeping everybody waiting for her, and Dr. Richard standing mute and red on the chancel steps, with the words, as it were, taken out of his very lips. When they all came out of chapel, Mrs. Matthews had a private interview with Miss Augustine, which detained her, and it was not till after the old people had dispersed to their cottages that she made her way over to the clock-tower in which the chaplain's rooms were situated. "You did not pray for my people, as I asked you," said Augustine, looking at him with her pale blue eyes. She was not angry or irritable, but asked the question softly. Dr. Richard had been waiting for her in his dining-room, which was a quaint room over the archway, with one window looking to the road, another to the garden. He was seated by the table, his wife beside him, who had not yet taken off her bonnet, and who held her smelling-salts in her hand.

"Miss Augustine," said the chaplain, with a little flush on his innocent aged face. He was a plump neat little old man, with the red and white of a girl in his gentle countenance. He had risen up when she entered, but being somewhat nervous sat down again,

though she never sat down. "Miss Augustine," he said solemnly, "I have told you before; I cannot do anything, even to oblige you, which is against Church law and every sound principle. Whatever happens to me, I must be guided by law."

"Does law forbid you to pray for your fellow-creatures who are in temptation?" said Miss Augustine without any change of her serious abstracted countenance.

"Miss Augustine, this is a question in which I cannot be dictated to," said the old gentleman, growing redder. "I will ask the prayers of the congregation for any special person who may be in trouble, sorrow, or distress, before the litany, or the collect for all conditions of men, making a pause at the appropriate petition, as is my duty; but I cannot go beyond the rubrics, whatever it may cost me," said Dr. Richard, with a look of determined resolution, as though he looked for nothing better than to be led immediately to the stake. And his wife fixed her eyes upon him admiringly, backing him up; and put, with a little pressure of his fingers, her smelling-salts into his hand.

"In that case," said Miss Augustine, in her abstracted way, "in that case—I will not ask you; but it is a pity

the rubrics should say it is your duty not to pray for any one in temptation; it was Susan," she added softly, with a sigh.

"Miss Susan!" said the chaplain, growing hotter than ever at the thought that he had nearly been betrayed into the impertinence of praying for a person whom he so much respected. He was horrified at the risk he had run. "Miss Augustine," he said severely, "if my conscience had permitted me to do this, which I am glad it did not, what would your sister have said? I could never have looked her in the face again, after taking such a liberty with her."

"We could never have looked her in the face again," echoed Mrs. Richard; "but, thank God, my dear, you stood fast!"

"Yes. I hope true Church principles and a strong resolution will always save me," said the Doctor, with gentle humility, "and that I may always have the resolution to stand fast!"

Miss Augustine made no reply to this for the moment. Then she said, without any change of tone, "Say, to-morrow, please, that prayers are requested for Susan Austin, on a voyage, and in temptation abroad."

"My dear Miss Augustine!" said the unhappy clergy-

man, taking a sniff at the salts, which now were truly needed.

"Yes; that will come to the same thing," said Miss Augustine quietly to herself.

She stood opposite to the agitated pair, with her hands folded into her great sleeves, her hood hanging back on her shoulders, her black veil falling softly about her pale head. There was no emotion in her countenance. Her mind was not alarmed about her sister. The prayer was a precautionary measure, to keep Susan out of temptation—not anything strenuously called for by necessity. She sighed softly as she made the reflection that to name her sister before the litany was said would answer her purpose equally well; and thus with a faint smile, and slight wave of her hand towards the chaplain and his wife, she turned and went away. The ordinary politenesses were lost upon Miss Augustine, and the door stood open behind her, so that there was no need for Dr. Richard to get up and open it; and, indeed, they were so used to her ways, her comings and her goings, that he did not think of it. So the old gentleman sat with his wife by his side, backing him up, gazing with consternation, and without a word, at the grey retreating figure. Mrs. Richard, who saw her

husband's perturbed condition, comforted him as best she could, patting his arm with her soft little hand, and whispering words of consolation. When Miss Augustine was fairly out of the house, the distressed clergyman at last permitted his feelings to burst forth.

"Pray for Susan Austin publicly by name!" he said rising and walking about the room. "My dear, it will ruin us! You will see it will ruin us! This comes of women having power in the church! I don't mean to say anything, my dear, injurious to your sex, which you know I respect deeply—in its own place; but a woman's interference in the church is enough to send the wisest man out of his wits."

"Dear Henery," said Mrs. Richard, for it was thus she pronounced her husband's name, "why should you be so much disturbed about it? when you know she is mad?"

"It is only her enemies who say she is mad," said Dr. Richard; "and even if she is mad, what does that matter? There is nothing against the rubrics in what she asks of me now. I shall be forced to do it; and what will Miss Susan say? And consider that all our comfort, everything, depends upon it. Ellen, you are

very sensible; but you don't grasp the full bearings of the subject as I do."

"No, my dear, I do not pretend to have your mind," said the good wife; "but things never turn out so bad as we fear," she said a moment after, with homely philosophy,—"nor so good either," she added with a sigh.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS SUSAN came home on the Saturday night. She was very tired, and saw no one that evening; but Martha, her old maid, who returned into attendance upon her natural mistress at once, thought and reported to the others that "something had come to Miss Susan." Whether it was tiredness or crossness, or bad news, or that her business had not turned out so well as she expected, no one could tell; but "something had come to her." Next morning she did not go to church—a thing which had not happened in the Austin family for ages.

"I had an intuition that you were yielding to temptation," Miss Augustine said with some solemnity, as she went out to prayers at the Almshouses; after which she meant to go to morning service in the church, as always.

"I am only tired, my dear," said Miss Susan, with a little shiver.

The remarks in the kitchen were more stringent than Miss Augustine's.

"Foreign parts apparently is bad for the soul," said Martha, when it was ascertained that Jane, too, following her mistress's example, did not mean to go to church.

"They're demoralizin', that's what they are," said Stevens, who liked a long word.

"I've always said as I'd never set foot out o' my own country, not for any money," said Cook, with the liberal mind natural to her craft.

Poor Jane, who had been very ill on the crossing, though the sea was calm, sat silent at the chimney corner with a bad headache, and very devout intentions to the same effect.

"If you knew what it was to go a sea-voyage, like I do," she protested with forlorn pride, "you'd have a deal more charity in you." But even Jane's little presents, brought from "abroad," did not quite conciliate the others, to whom this chit of a girl had been preferred. Jane on the whole, however, was better off, even amid the criticisms of the kitchen, than Miss Susan was, seated by herself in the drawing-room, to which the sun did not come round till the afternoon, with the same picture hanging before her eyes which she had used to tempt the

Austins at Bruges, with a shawl about her shoulders, and a sombre consciousness in her heart that had never before been known there. It was one of those dull days which so often interpose their unwelcome presence into an English summer. The sky and the world were grey with east wind, the sun hidden, the colour all gone out. The trees stood about and shivered, striking the clouds with their hapless heads; the flowers looked pitiful and appealing, as if they would have liked to be brought indoors and kept in shelter; and the dreariness of the fire-place, done up in white-paper ornaments, as is the orthodox summer fashion of England, was unspeakable. Miss Susan, drawing her shawl round her, sat in her easy chair near the fire by habit; and a more dismal centre of the room could not have been than that chilly whiteness. How she would have liked a fire! but in the beginning of July, what Englishwoman, with a proper fear of her housemaid before her eyes, would dare to ask for that indulgence? So Miss Susan sat and shivered, and watched the cold trees looking in at the window, and the grey sky above, and drew her shawl closer with a shiver that went through her very heart. The vibration of the church bells was in the still, rural air, and not a sound in the house. Miss

Susan felt as if she were isolated by some stern power; set apart from the world because of "what had happened;" which was the way she described her own very active agency during the past week to herself. But this did not make her repent, or change her mind in any respect; the excitement of her evil inspiration was still strong upon her; and then there was as yet no wrong done, only intended, and of course, at any moment, the wrong which was only in intention might be departed from, and all be well. She had that morning received a letter from Reine, full of joyous thanksgiving over Herbert's improvement. Augustine, who believed in miracles, had gone off to church in great excitement, to put up Herbert's name as giving thanks, and to tell the poor people that their prayers had been so far heard; but Miss Susan, who was more of this world, and did not believe in miracles, and to whom the fact that any human event was very desirable made it at once less likely, put very little faith in Reine's letter. "Poor child! poor boy!" she said to herself, shaking her head and drying her eyes; then put it aside, and thought little more of it. Her own wickedness that she had planned was more exciting to her. She sat and brooded over that, while all the parish said their prayers in

church, where she, too, ought to have been. For she was not, after all, so very tired; her mind was as full and lively as if there had not been such a thing as fatigue in the world; and I do not think she had anything like an adequate excuse for staying at home.

On the Sunday afternoon Miss Susan received a visit which roused her a little from the self-absorption which this new era in her existence had brought about, though it was only Dr. and Mrs. Richard, who walked across the fields to see her after her journey, and to take a cup of tea. They were a pleasant little couple to see, jogging across the fields arm in arm—he the prettiest fresh-coloured little old gentleman, in glossy black and ivory white, a model of a neat, little elderly clergyman; she not quite so pretty, but very trim and neat too, in a nice black silk gown, and a bonnet with a rose in it. Mrs. Richard was rather hard upon the old women at the Almshouses for their battered flowers, and thought a little plain uniform bonnet of the cottage shape, with a simple brown ribbon, would have been desirable; but for her own part she clung to the rose, which nodded on the summit of her head. Both of them, however, had a conscious look upon their innocent old faces. They had come to "discharge a duty," and the

solemnity of this duty, which was, as they said to each other, a very painful one, overwhelmed and slightly excited them. "What if she should be there herself?" said Mrs. Richard, clasping a little closer her husband's arm, to give emphasis. "It does not matter who is there; I must do my duty," said the Doctor, in heroic tones; "besides," he added, dropping his voice, "she never notices anything that is not said to her, poor soul!"

But happily Miss Augustine was not present when they were shown into the drawing-room where Miss Susan sat writing letters. A good deal was said, of course, which was altogether foreign to the object of the visit: How she had enjoyed her journey, whether it was not very fatiguing, whether it had not been very delightful, and a charming change, &c. Miss Susan answered all their questions benignly enough, though she was very anxious to get back to the letter she was writing to Farrel-Austin, and rang the bell for tea, and poured it out, and was very gracious, secretly asking herself, what in the name of wonder had brought them here to-day to torment her? But it was not till he had been strengthened by these potations that Dr. Richard spoke.

"My dear Miss Susan," he said at length, "my com-

ing to-day was not purely accidental, or merely to ask for you after your journey. I wanted to—if you will permit me—put you on your guard."

"In what respect?" said Miss Susan quickly, feeling her heart begin to beat. Dr. Richard was the last person in the world whom she could suppose likely to know about the object of her rapid journey, or what she had done; but guilt is very suspicious, and she felt herself immediately put upon her defence.

"I trust you will not take it amiss that I should speak to you on such a subject," said the old clergyman, clearing his throat; his pretty, old pink cheek grew quite red with agitation. "I take the very greatest interest in both you and your sister, Miss Susan. You are both of you considerably younger than I am, and I have been here now more than a dozen years, and one cannot help taking an interest in everything connected with the family——"

"No, indeed; one cannot help it; it would be quite unnatural if one did not take an interest," said Mrs. Richard, backing him up.

"But nobody objects to your taking an interest," said Miss Susan. "I think it, as you say, the most natural thing in the world."

"Thanks, thanks, for saying so!" said Dr. Richard, with enthusiasm; and then he looked at his wife, and his wife at him, and there was an awful pause.

"My dear, good, excellent people," said Miss Susan hurriedly, "for heaven's sake, if there is any bad news coming, out with it at once!"

"No, no; no bad news!" said Dr. Richard; and then he cleared his throat. "The fact is, I came to speak to you—about Miss Augustine. I am afraid her eccentricity is increasing. It is painful, very painful to me to say so, for but for her kindness my wife and I should not have been half so comfortable these dozen years past; but I think it a friend's duty, not to say a clergyman's. Miss Susan, you are aware that people say that she is—not quite right in her mind!"

"I am aware that people talk a great deal of nonsense," said Miss Susan, half relieved, half aggravated. "I should not wonder if they said I was mad myself."

"If they knew!" she added mentally, with a curious thrill of self-arraignment, judging her own cause, and in the twinkling of an eye running over the past and the future, and wondering, if she should ever be found out, whether people would say she was mad too.

"No, no," said the Doctor; "you are well known for one of the most sensible women in the county."

"Quite one of the most influential and well-known people in the county," said Mrs. Richard, with an echo in which there was always an individual tone.

"Well, well; let that be as it may," said Miss Susan, not dissatisfied with this appreciation; "and what has my sister done—while I have been absent, I suppose?"

"It is a matter of great gravity, and closely concerning myself," said Dr. Richard, with some dignity. "You are aware, Miss Susan, that my office as Warden of the Almshouses is in some respects an anomalous one, making me, in some degree subordinate, or apparently so, in my ecclesiastical position to—in fact, to a lady. It is quite a strange, almost unprecedented, combination of circumstances."

"Very strange indeed," said Mrs. Richard. "My husband, in his ecclesiastical position, as it were subordinate—to a lady."

"Pardon me," said Miss Susan; "I never interfere with Augustine. You knew how it would be when you came."

"But there are some things one was not prepared for," said the Doctor, with irrestrainable pathos. "It

might set me wrong with the persons I respect most, Miss Susan. Your sister not only attempted to add a petition to the prayers of the Church, which nobody is at liberty to do except the Archbishops themselves, acting under the authority of Government; but finding me inexorable in that—for I hope nothing will ever lead me astray from the laws of the Church—she directed me to request the prayers of the congregation for you, the most respectable person in the neighbourhood—for you as exposed to temptation!"

A strange change passed over Miss Susan's face. She had been ready to laugh, impatient of the long explanation, and scarcely able to conceal her desire to get rid of her visitors. She sat poising the pen in her hand with which she had been writing, turning over her papers, with a smile on her lip; but when Dr. Richard came to these last words, her face changed all at once. She dropped the pen out of her hand, her face grew grey, the smile disappeared in a moment, and Miss Susan sat looking at them, with a curious consciousness about her, which the excellent couple could not understand.

"What day was that?" she said quickly, almost under her breath.

"It was on Thursday."

"Thursday morning," added Mrs. Richard. "If you remember, Henery, you got a note about it quite early, and after chapel she spoke——"

"Yes, it was quite early; probably the note," said the chaplain, "was written on Wednesday night."

Miss Susan was ashy grey; all the blood seemed to have gone out of her. She made them no answer at first, but sat brooding, like a woman struck into stone. Then she rose to her feet suddenly as the door opened, and Augustine, grey and silent, came in, gliding like a mediæval saint.

"My sister is always right," said Miss Susan, almost passionately, going suddenly up to her and kissing her pale cheek with a fervour no one understood, and Augustine least of all. "I always approve what she does;" and having made this little demonstration, she returned to her seat, and took up her pen again, with more show of preoccupation than before.

What could the old couple do after this but make their bow and their courtesy, and go off again bewildered? "I think Miss Susan is the maddest of the two," said Mrs. Richard, when they had two long fields between them and Whiteladies; and I am not surprised,

I confess, that they should have thought so, on that occasion, at least.

Miss Susan was deeply struck with this curious little incident. She had always entertained a half-visionary respect for her sister, something of the reverential feeling with which some nations regard those who are imperfectly developed in intelligence; and this curious revelation deepened the sentiment into something half-adoring, half-afraid. Nobody knew what she had done, but Augustine knew somehow that she had been in temptation. I cannot describe the impression this made upon her mind and her heart, which were guilty but quite unaccustomed to guilt. It thrilled her through and through; but it did not make her give up her purpose, which was perhaps the strangest thing of all.

"My dear," she said, assuming with some difficulty an ordinary smile, "what made you think I was going wrong when I was away?"

"What made me think it? nothing—something that came into my mind. You do not understand how I am moved and led," said Augustine, looking at her sister seriously.

"No, dear, no—I don't understand; that is true.

God bless you, my dear!" said the woman who was guilty, turning away with a tremor which Augustine understood as little—her whole being tremulous and softened with love and reverence, and almost awe, of the spotless creature by her; but I suspect, though Miss Susan felt so deeply the wonderful fact that her sister had divined her moral danger, she was not in the least moved thereby to turn away from that moral danger, or give up her wicked plan; which is as curious a problem as I remember to have met with. Having all the habits of truth and virtue, she was touched to the heart to think that Augustine should have had a mysterious consciousness of the moment when she was about to abandon the right path, and felt the whole situation sentimentally, as if she had read it in a story; but it had not the slightest effect otherwise. With this tremor of feeling upon her, she went back to her writing-table, and finished her letter to Farrel-Austin, which was as follows:—

"DEAR COUSIN,—Having had some business which called me abroad last week, my interest in the facts you told me, the last time I had the pleasure of seeing you, led me to pass by Bruges, where I saw our common

relations, the Austins. They seem very nice, homely people, and I enjoyed making their acquaintance, though it was curious to realise relations of ours occupying such a position. I heard from them, however, that a discovery had been made in the meantime which seriously interferes with the bargain which they made with you; indeed, is likely to invalidate it altogether. I took in hand to inform you of the facts, though they are rather delicate to be discussed between a lady and a gentleman; but it would have been absurd of a woman of my age to make any difficulty on such a matter. If you will call on me, or appoint a time at which I can see you at your own house, I will let you know exactly what are the facts of the case; though I have no doubt you will at once divine them, if you were informed at the time you saw the Bruges Austins that their son who died had left a young widow.

"With compliments to Mrs. Farrel-Austin and your girls,

"Believe me, truly yours,

"SUSAN AUSTIN."

I do not know that Miss Susan had ever written to Farrel-Austin in so friendly a spirit before. She felt

almost cordial towards him as she put her letter into the envelope. If this improvement in friendly feeling was the first product of an intention to do the man wrong, then wrong-doing, she felt, must be rather an amiable influence than otherwise: and she went to rest that night with a sense of satisfaction in her mind. In the late Professor Aytoun's quaint poem of "Firmilian," it is recorded that the hero of that drama committed many murders and other crimes in a vain attempt to study the sensation usually called Remorse, but was entirely unsuccessful, even when his crimes were on the grandest scale, and attended by many aggravating circumstances. Miss Susan knew nothing about Firmilian, but I think her mind was in a very similar state. She was not at all affected in sentiment by her conspiracy. She felt the same as usual, nay, almost better than usual, more kindly towards her enemy whom she was going to injure, and more reverential and admiring to her saintly sister, who had divined something of her evil intentions—or at least had divined her danger, though without the slightest notion what the kind of evil was to which she was tempted. Miss Susan was indeed half frightened at herself when she found how very little impression her

own wickedness had made upon her. The first night she had been a little alarmed when she said her prayers; but this had all worn off, and she went to bed without a tremor, and slept the sleep of innocence—the sleep of the just. She was so entirely herself that she was able to reflect how strange it was, and how little the people who write sermons know the state of the real mind. She was astonished herself at the perfect calm with which she regarded her own contemplated crime, for crime it was.

CHAPTER XV.

MR. FARREL-AUSTIN lived in a house which was called the Hatch, though I cannot tell what is the meaning of the name. It was a modern house, like hundreds of others, solid and ugly, and comfortable enough, with a small park round it, and—which it could scarcely help having in Berkshire—some fine trees about. Farrel-Austin had a good deal of property; his house stood upon his own land, though his estate was not very extensive, and he had a considerable amount of money in good investments, and some house-property in London, in the City, which was very valuable. Altogether, therefore, he was well off, and lived in a comfortable way with everything handsome about him. All his family at present consisted of the two daughters who came with him to visit Whiteladies, as we have seen; but he had married a second time, and had an ailing wife who was continually, as people say, having expectations," which, however, never came to anything.

He had been married for about ten years, and during this long period Mrs. Farrel-Austin's expectations had been a joke among her neighbours; but they were no joke to her husband, nor to the two young ladies, her step-daughters, who, as they could not succeed to the Austin lands themselves, were naturally very desirous to have a brother who could do so. They were not very considerate of Mrs. Austin generally, but in respect to her health they were solicitous beyond measure. They took such care of her, that the poor woman's life became a burden to her, and especially at the moment when there were expectations did this care and anxiety overflow. The poor soul had broken down, body and mind, under this surveillance. She had been a pretty girl enough when she married, and entered with a light heart upon her functions, not afraid of what might happen to her; but Mr. Farrel-Austin's unsatisfied longing for an heir, and the supervision of the two sharp girls who grew up so very soon to be young ladies, and evidently considered, as their father did, that the sole use and meaning of their mild young stepmother was to produce that necessary article, soon made an end of all her lightheartedness. Her courage totally failed. She had no very strong emotions any

way, but a little affection and kindness were necessary to keep her going, and this she did not get, in the kind that was important, at least. Her husband, I suppose, was fond of her, as (of course) all husbands are of all wives; but she could not pet or make friends with the girls, who, short of her possible use as the mother of an heir, found her very much in their way, and had no inclination to establish affectionate relations with her. Therefore she took to her sofa, poor soul, and to tonics, and the state of an invalid—a condition which, when one has nothing particular to do in the world, and nothing to amuse or occupy a flat existence, is not a bad expedient in its way for the feeble soul, giving it the support of an innocent, if not very agreeable routine—rules to observe and physic to take. This was how poor Mrs. Farrel-Austin endeavoured to *dédommager* herself for the failure of her life. She preserved a pale sort of faded prettiness even on her sofa; and among the society which the girls collected round them there was now and then one who would seek refuge with the mild invalid, when the fun of the younger party grew too fast and furious. Even, I believe, the stepmother might have set up a flirtation or two of her own had she cared for that amusement; but fortunately she had her

tonics to take, which was a more innocent gratification, and suited all parties better; for a man must be a very robust flirt indeed, whose attentions can support the frequent interposition of a maid with a medicine-bottle and a spoon.

The society of the Farrel-Austins was of a kind which might be considered very fine, or the reverse, according to the taste of the critic, though that, indeed, may be said of almost all society. They knew, of course, and visited, all the surrounding gentry, among whom there were a great many worthy people, though nothing so remarkable as to stand out from the general level; but what was more important to the young ladies, at least, they had the officers of the regiment which was posted near, and in which there were a great many very noble young personages, ornaments to any society, who accepted Mr. Farrel-Austin's invitations freely, and derived a great deal of amusement from his household, without perhaps paying that natural tribute of respect and civility to their entertainers behind their backs which is becoming in the circumstances. Indeed, the Farrel-Austins were not quite on the same social level as the Marquis of Dropmore or Lord Ffarington, who were constantly at the Hatch when their regiment

was stationed near, nor even of Lord Alf Groombridge, though he was as poor as a church-mouse; and the same thing might be said of a great many other honourable and distinguished young gentlemen who kept a continual riot at the house, and made great havoc with the cellar, and on Sundays, especially, would keep this establishment, which ought to have been almost pious in its good order, in a state of hurry and flurry, and noise and laughter, as if it had been a hotel. The Austins, it is true, boasted themselves of good family, though nothing definite was known of them before Henry VIII.—and they were rich enough to entertain their distinguished visitors at very considerable cost; but they had neither that rank which introduces the possessor into all circles, nor that amount of money which makes up every deficiency. Had one of the Miss Farrel-Austins married the Marquis or the Earl, or even Lord Alf in his impecuniosity, she would have been said to have "succeeded in catching" poor Dropmore, or poor Ffarington, and would have been stormed or wept over by the gentleman's relations as if she had been a ragged girl off the streets—King Cophetua's beggar-maid herself; notwithstanding that these poor inno-

cents, Ffarington and Dropmore, had taken advantage of the father's hospitalities for months or years before. I am bound to add that the Farrel-Austins were not only fully aware of this, but would have used exactly the same phraseology themselves in respect to any other young lady of their own standing whose fascinations had been equally exercised upon the well-fortified bosoms of Dropmore and Company. Nevertheless they adapted themselves to the amusements which suited their visitors, and in summer lived in a lively succession of out-door parties, spending half of their time in drags, in boats, on race-courses, at cricket-matches, and other energetic diversions. Sometimes their father was their chaperon, sometimes a young married lady belonging to the same society, and with the same tastes. The very highest and the very lowest classes of society have a great affinity to each other. There was always something planned for Sunday in this lively "set"—they were as eager to put the day to use as if they had been working hard all the week, and had this day only to amuse themselves in. I suppose they, or perhaps their father, began to do this because there was in it the delightful piquancy of sensation which the *blasé* appetite feels when it is able to shock some-

body else by its gratifications; and though they have long ago ceased to shock anybody, the flavour of the sensation lasted. All the servants at the Hatch, indeed, were shocked vastly, which preserved a little of this delightful sense of naughtiness. The quieter neighbours round, especially those houses in which there were no young people, disapproved, also, in a general way, and called the Miss Austins fast; and Miss Susan disapproved most strenuously, I need not say, and expressed her contempt in terms which she took no trouble to modify. But I cannot deny that there was a general hankering among the younger members of society for a share in these brilliant amusements; and Everard Austin could not see what harm it did that the girls should enjoy themselves, and had no objection to join them, and liked Kate and Sophy so much that sometimes he was moved to think that he liked one of them more. His house, indeed, which was on the river, was a favourite centre for their expeditions, and I think even that, though he was not rich, neither of his cousins would have rejected Everard off-hand without deliberation—for, to be sure, he was the heir, at present, after their father, and every year made it less likely that Mrs. Austin would produce the much-wished-for suc-

cessor. Neither of them would have quite liked to risk accepting him yet, in face of all the possibilities which existed in the way of Dropmore, Ffarington, and Company; but yet they would not have refused him off-hand.

Now I may as well tell the reader at once that Kate and Sophy Farrel-Austin were not what either I or he (she) would call *nice* girls. I am fond of girls, for my own part. I don't like to speak ill of them, or give an unfavourable impression, and as it is very probable that my prejudice in favour of the species may betray me into some relentings in respect to these particular examples, some softening of their after-proceedings, or explanation of their devices, I think it best to say at once that they were not nice girls. They had not very sweet natures to begin with; for the fact is—and it is a very terrible one—that a great many people do come into the world with natures which are not sweet, and enter upon the race of life handicapped (if I may be permitted an irregular but useful expression) in the most frightful way. I do not pretend to explain this mystery, which, among all the mysteries of earth, is one of the most cruel, but I am forced to believe it. Kate and Sophy had never been very *nice*. Their father before them was not *nice*, but an extremely selfish and self-

regarding person, often cross, and with no generosity or elevation of mind to set them a better example. They had no mother, and no restraint, except that of school, which is very seldom more than external and temporary. The young stepmother had begun by petting them, but neither could nor wished to attempt to rule the girls, who soon acquired a contempt for her; and as her invalidism grew, they took the control of the house, as well as themselves, altogether out of her hands. From sixteen they had been in that state of rampant independence and determination to have their own way, which has now, I fear, become as common among girls as it used to be among boys, when education was more neglected than it is nowadays. Boys who are at school—and even when they are young men at the university—must be in some degree of subordination; but girls who do not respect their parents are absolutely beyond this useful power, and can be described as nothing but rampant—the unloveliest as well as unwholesomest of all mental and moral attitudes. Kate had come out at sixteen, and since that time had been constantly in this rampant state; by sheer force and power of will she had kept Sophy back until she also attained that mature age, but her power

ended at that point, and Sophy had then become rampant too. They turned everything upside down in the house, planned their life according to their pleasure, overrode the stepmother, coaxed the father, who was fond and proud of them—the best part of his character—and set out thus in the Dropmore and Ffarington kind of business. At sixteen girls do not plan to be married—they plan to enjoy themselves; and these noble young gentlemen seemed best adapted to second their intentions. But it is inconceivable how old a young woman is at twenty-one who has begun life at sixteen in this tremendous way. Kate, who had been for five long years thus about the world—at all the balls, at all the pleasure-parties, at all the races, regattas, cricket-matches, flower-shows, every kind of country entertainment—and at everything she could attain to in town in the short season which her father could afford to give them—felt herself about a hundred when she attained her majority. She had done absolutely everything that can be done in the way of amusement—at least in England; and the last winter and spring had been devoted to doing the same sort of thing "abroad." There was nothing new under the sun to this unfortunate young woman—unless, perhaps, it might be getting married,

which had for some time begun to appear a worthy object in her eyes. To make a good match and gain a legitimate footing in the society to which Dropmore, &c., belonged; to be able to give "a good setting down" to the unapproachable women who ignored her from its heights—and to snatch the delights of a title by sheer strength and skill from among her hurly-burly of Guardsmen, this had begun to seem to Kate the thing most worth thinking of in the world. It was "full time" she should take some such step, for she was old, *blasée*, beginning to fear that she must be *passée* too,—at one and twenty! Nineteen at the outside is the age at which the rampant girl ought to marry in order to carry out her career without a cloud—the marriage, of course, *bien entendu*, being of an appropriate kind.

The Sunday which I have just described, on which Miss Susan did not go to church, had been spent by the young ladies in their usual way. There had been a river party, preceded by a luncheon at Everard's house, which, having been planned when the weather was hot, had of course to be carried out, though the day was cold with that chill of July which is more penetrating than December. The girls in their white dresses had paid for their pleasure, and the somewhat riotous

late dinner which awaited the party at the Hatch had scarcely sufficed to warm their feet and restore their comfort. It was only next morning pretty late, over the breakfast which they shared in Kate's room, the largest of the two inhabited by the sisters—that they could talk over their previous day's pleasure. And even then their attention was disturbed by a curious piece of news, which had been brought to them along with their tray, and which was to the effect that Herbert Austin had suddenly and miraculously recovered his health, thanks having been given for him in the parish church at St. Austin's on the previous morning. The gardener had gone to church there, with the intention of negotiating with the gardener at Whiteladies about certain seedlings, and he had brought back the information. His wife had told it to the housekeeper, and the housekeeper to the butler, and the butler to the young ladies' maid, so that the report had grown in magnitude as it rolled onward. Sarah reported with a courtesy that Mr. Herbert was quite well, and was expected home directly—indeed, she was not quite sure whether he was not at home already, and in church when the clergyman read out his name as returning thanks—that would be the most natural way; and as she

thought it over, Sarah concluded, and said, that this must have been what she heard.

"Herbert better! what a bore!" said Sophy, not heeding the presence of the maid. "What right has he to get better, I should like to know, and cut papa out?"

"Everybody has a right to do the best for themselves, when they can," said Kate, whose *rôle* it was to be sensible; "but I don't believe it can be true."

"I assure you, miss," said Sarah, who was a pert maid, such as should naturally belong to such young ladies, "as gardener heard it with his own ears, and there could be no doubt on the subject. I said, 'My young ladies won't never believe it;' and Mr. Beaver, he said, 'They'll find as it's too true!'"

"It was very impudent of Beaver to say anything of the sort," said Kate, "and you may tell him so. Now go; you don't require to wait any longer. I'll ring when I'm ready to have my hair done. Hold your tongue, Soph, for two minutes, till that girl's gone. They tell everything, and they remember everything."

"What do I care?" said Sophy; "if twenty people were here I'd say just the same. What an awful bore, when papa had quite made up his mind to have

Whiteladies! I should like to do something to that Herbert, if it's true; and it's sure to be true."

"I don't believe it," said Kate reflectively. "One often hears of these cases rallying just for a week or two—but there's no cure for consumption. It would be too teasing if——but you may be sure it isn't and can't be——"

"Everything that is unpleasant comes true," said Sophy. This was one of the sayings with which she amused her *monde*, and made Dropmore and the rest declare that "By Jove! that girl was not so soft as she looked." "I think it is an awful bore for poor papa."

After they had exhausted this gloomy view of the subject, they began to look at its brighter side, if it had one.

"After all," said Sophy, "having Whiteladies won't do very much for papa. It is clear he is not going to have an heir, and he can't leave it to us; and what good would it do him, poor old thing, for the time he has to live?"

"Papa is not so very old," said Kate, "nor so very fond of us either, Sophy. He wants it for himself; and so should I, if I were in his place."

"He wants it for the coming man," said Sophy,

"who won't come. I wonder, for my part, that poor mamma don't steal a child; I should in her place. Where would be the harm? and then everybody would be pleased."

"Except Everard, and whoever marries Everard."

"So long as that is neither you nor me," said Sophy, laughing, "I don't mind; I should rather like to spite Everard's wife, if she's somebody else. Why should men ever marry? I am sure they are a great deal better as they are."

"Speaking of marrying," said Kate seriously, "far the best thing for you to do, if it is true about Herbert, is to marry *him*, Sophy. You are the one that is the most suitable in age. He is just a simple innocent, and knows nothing of the world, so you could easily have him, if you liked to take the trouble; and then Whiteladies would be secured, one way or another, and papa pleased."

"But me having it would not be like him having it," said Sophy. "Would he be pleased? You said not, just now."

"It would be the best that could be done," said Kate; and then she began to recount to her sister certain things that Dropmore had said, and to ask

whether Sophy thought they meant anything; which Sophy, wise in her sister's concerns, however foolish in her own, did not think they did, though she herself had certain words laid up from "Alf," in which she had more faith, but which Kate scouted. "They are only amusing themselves," said the elder sister. "If Herbert does get better, marry him, Sophy, with my blessing, and be content."

"And you could have Everard, and we should neither of us change our names, but make one charming family party——"

"Oh, bosh! I hate your family parties; besides, Everard would have nothing in that case," said Kate, ringing the bell for the maid, before whom they did not exactly continue their discussion, but launched forth about Dropmore and Alf.

"There's been some one over here from the Barracks this morning," said Sarah, "with a note for master. I think it was the Markis's own man, miss."

"What ever could it be?" cried both the sisters together, for they were very slipshod in their language, as the reader will perceive.

"And Miss Kate did go all of a tremble, and her cheeks like strawberries," Sarah reported in the servants'

hall, where, indeed, the Markis's man had already learned that nothing but a wedding could excuse such goings on.

"We ain't such fools as we look," that functionary had answered with a wink, witty as his master himself.

I do not think that Kate, who knew the world, had any idea, after the first momentary thrill of curiosity, that Dropmore's note to her father could contain anything of supreme importance, but it might be, and probably was, a proposal for some new expedition, at any one of which matters might come to a crisis; and she sallied forth from her room accordingly, in her fresh morning dress, looking a great deal fresher than she felt, and with a little subdued excitement in her mind. She went to the library, where her father generally spent his mornings, and gave him her cheek to kiss, and asked affectionately after his health.

"I do hope you have no rheumatism, papa, after last night. Oh, how cold it was! I don't think I shall ever let myself be persuaded to go on the water in an east wind again."

"Not till the next time Dropmore asks," said her father in his surliest voice.

"Dropmore, oh!" Kate shrugged her shoulders. "A

great deal I care for what he asks. By-the-bye, I believe this is his cipher. Have you been hearing from Dropmore this morning, papa? and what does his most noble lordship please to want?"

"Bah! what does it matter what he wants?" said Mr. Farrel-Austin savagely. "Do you suppose I have nothing to do but act as secretary for your amusements? Not when I have news of my own like what I have this morning;" and his eye reverted to a large letter which lay before him with "Whiteladies" in a flowery heading above the date.

"Is it true, then, that Herbert is better?" said Kate.

"Herbert better! rubbish! Herbert will never be better; but that old witch has undermined me!" cried the disappointed heir with flashing eyes.

CHAPTER XVI.

"PAPA has just heard that Herbert Austin, who has Whiteladies, you know—our place that is to be—is much better; and he is low about it," said Sophy. "Of course, if Herbert were to get better it would be a great disappointment for us."

This speech elicited a shout of laughter from Dropmore and the rest, with running exclamations of "Frank, by Jove!" and "I like people who speak their minds."

"Well," said Sophy, "if I were to say we were all delighted, who would believe me? It is the most enchanting old house in the world, and a good property, and we have always been led to believe that he was in a consumption. I declare I don't know what is bad enough for him, if he is going to swindle us out of it, and live."

"Sophy, you should not talk so wildly," said mild

Mrs. Austin from her sofa. "People will think you mean what you say."

"And I do," said the girl. "I hate a cheat. Papa is quite low about it, and so is cousin Everard. They are down upon their luck."

"Am I?" said Everard, who was a little out of temper, it must be allowed, but chiefly because in the presence of the Guardsmen he was very much thrown into the shade. "I don't know about being down on my luck; but it's not a sweet expression for a young lady to use."

"Oh, I don't mind about expressions that young ladies ought to use!" said Sophy. A tinge of colour came on her face at the reproof, but she tossed her pretty head, and went on all the more: "Why shouldn't girls use the same words as other people do? You men want to keep the best of everything to yourselves—nice strong expressions and all the rest."

"By Jove!" said Lord Alf; "mind you, I don't like a girl to swear—it ain't the thing somehow; but for a phrase like 'down on his luck,' or 'awful fun,' or anything like that——"

"And pray why shouldn't you like a girl to swear?" said Kate. "'By Jove,' for instance? I like it. It

gives a great deal of point to your conversation, Lord Alf."

"Oh, bless you, that ain't swearing. But it don't do. I am not very great at reasons; but, by Jove, you must draw the line somewhere. I don't think now that a girl ought to swear."

"Except 'her pretty oath of yea and nay,'" said Everard, who had a little, a very little, literature.

The company in general stared at him, not having an idea what he meant; and as it is more humbling somehow to fail in a shot of this description, which goes over the head of your audience, than it is to show actual inferiority, Everard felt himself grow very red and hot, and feel very angry. The scene was the drawing-room at the Hatch, where a party of callers were spending the afternoon, eating bread-and-butter and drinking tea, and planning new delights. After this breakdown, for so he felt it, Everard withdrew hastily to Mrs. Austin's sofa, and began to talk to her, though he did not quite know what it was about. Mild Mrs. Austin, though she did not understand the attempts which one or two of the visitors of the house had made to flirt with her, was pleased to be talked to, and approved of Everard, who was

never noisy, though often "led away," like all the others, by the foolishness of the girls.

"I am glad you said that about this slang they talk," said Mrs. Austin. "Perhaps coming from you it may have some weight with them. They do not mind what I say. And have you heard any more about poor Herbert? You must not think Mr. Austin is low about it, as they said. They only say such things to make people laugh."

This charitable interpretation arose from the poor lady's desire to do the best for her stepchildren, whom it was one of the regrets of her faded life, now and then breathed into the ear of a confidential friend, that she did not love as she ought.

"I have only heard he is better," said Everard; "and it is no particular virtue on my part to be heartily glad of it. I am not poor Herbert's heir."

He spoke louder than he had any need to speak; for Mrs. Austin, though an invalid, was not at all deaf. But I fear that he had a hankering to be heard and replied to, and called back into the chattering circle which had formed round the girls. Neither Kate nor Sophy, however, had any time at the moment to attend to Everard, whom they felt sure they could wheedle back at any

time. He gave a glance towards them with the corner of his eye, and saw Kate seriously inclining her pretty pink ear to some barrack joke which the most noble Marquis of Dropmore was recounting with many interruptions of laughter; while Sophy carried on with Lord Alf and an applauding auditory that discussion about where the line should be drawn, and what girls might and might not do. "I hunt whenever I can," Sophy was saying; "and I wish there was a ladies' club at Hurlingham or somewhere; I should go in for all the prizes. And I'm sure I could drive your team every bit as well as you do. Oh, what I would give just to have the ribbons in my hand! You should see then how a drag could go."

Everard listened, deeply disgusted. He had not been in the least disgusted when the same sort of thing had been said to himself, but had laughed and applauded with the rest, feeling something quite irresistible in the notion of pretty Sophy's manly longings. Her little delicate hands, her slim person, no weightier than a bird, the toss of her charming head, with its wavy, fair locks, like a flower, all soft colour and movement, had put ineffable humour into the suggestion of those exploits in which she longed to emulate the heroes of the household brigade. But now, when Everard was outside the

circle, he felt a totally different sentiment move him. Clouds and darkness came over his face, and I do not know what further severity might have come from his lips, had not Mr. Farrel-Austin, looking still blacker than himself, come into the room, in a way which added very little to the harmony, though something to the amusement, of the party. He nodded to the visitors, snarled at the girls, and said something disagreeable to his wife, all in two minutes by the clock.

"How can you expect to be well, if you go on drinking tea for ever and ever?" he said to the only harmless member of the party. "Afternoon tea must have been invented by the devil himself to destroy women's nerves and their constitutions." He said this as loudly and with the same intention as had moved Everard; and he had more success, for Dropmore, Alf, and the rest turned round with their teacups in their hands, and showed their excellent teeth under their moustachios in a roar of laughter. "I had not the least idea I was so amusing," said Mr. Farrel, sourer than ever. "Here, Everard, let me have a word with you."

"By Jove! he *is* down on his luck," said Lord Alf to Sophy in an audible aside.

"Didn't I tell you so?" said the elegant young lady;

"and when he's low he's always as cross as two sticks."

"Everard," said Mr. Farrel-Austin, "I am going over to Whiteladies on business. That old witch, Susan Austin, has outwitted us both. As it is your interest as well as mine, you had better drive over with me—unless you prefer the idiocy here to all the interests of life, as some of these fools seem to do."

"Not I," said Everard with much stateliness, "as you may perceive, for I am taking no part in it. I am quite at your service. But if it's about poor Herbert, I don't see what Miss Susan can have to do with it," he added, casting a longing look behind.

"Bah! Herbert is neither here nor there," said the heir-presumptive. "You don't suppose I put any faith in that. She has spread the rumour, perhaps, to confuse us and put us off the scent. These old women," said Mr. Farrel with deliberate virulence, "are the very devil when they put their minds to it. And you are as much interested as I am, Everard, as I have no son—and what with the absurdity and perverseness of women," he added, setting his teeth with deliberate virulence, "don't seem likely to have."

I don't know whether the company in the drawing-

room heard this speech. Indeed, I do not think they could have heard it, being fully occupied by their own witty and graceful conversation. But there came in at this moment a burst of laughter which drove the two gentlemen furious in quite different ways, as they strode with all the dignity of ill-temper down-stairs. Farrel-Austin did not care for the Guardsmen's laughter in itself, nor was he critical of the manners of his daughters, but he was in a state of irritation which any trifle would have made to boil over. And Everard was in that condition of black disapproval which every word and tone increases, and to which the gaiety of a laugh is the direst of offences. He would have laughed as gaily as any of them had he been seated where Lord Alf was; but being "out of it," to use their own elegant language, he could see nothing but what was objectionable, insolent, nay, disgusting, in the sound.

What influenced Farrel-Austin to take the young man with him, however, I am unable to say. Probably it was the mere suggestion of the moment, the congenial sight of a countenance as cloudy as his own, and perhaps a feeling that as (owing to the perverseness of women) their interests were the same, Everard might help him to unravel Miss Susan's meaning, and to ascertain what

foundation in reality there was for her letter which had disturbed him so greatly; and then Everard was the friend and pet of the ladies, and Farrel felt that to convey him over as his own second and backer-up would inflict a pang upon his antagonist; which, failing victory for yourself, is always a good thing to do. As for Everard, he went in pure despite, a most comprehensible reason, hoping to punish by his dignified withdrawal the little company whose offence was that it did not appreciate his presence. Foolish yet natural motive —which will continue to influence boys and girls, and even men and women, as long as there are two sets of us in the world; and that will be as long as the world lasts, I suppose.

The two gentlemen got into the dog-cart which stood at the door, and dashed away across the summer country in the lazy, drowsy afternoon to Whiteladies. The wind had changed and was breathing softly from the west, and summer had recovered its power. Nothing was moving that could help it through all the warm and leafy country. The kine lay drowsy in the pastures, not caring even to graze, or stood about, the white ones dazzling in the sunshine, contemplating the world around in a meditative calm. The heat had stilled

every sound, except that of the insects whose existence it is; and the warm grass basked, and the big white daisies on the roadside trembled with a still pleasure, drinking in the golden light into their golden hearts.

But the roads were dusty, which was the chief thing the two men thought of except their business. Everard heard for the first time of the bargain Farrel had made with the Austins of Bruges, and did not quite know what to think of it, or which side to take in the matter. A sensation of annoyance that his companion had succeeded in finding people for whom he had himself made so many vain searches, was the first feeling that moved him. But whether he liked or did not like Farrel's bargain, he could not tell. He did not like it, because he had no desire to see Farrel-Austin reigning at Whiteladies; and he did not dislike it because, on the whole, Farrel would probably make a better Squire than an old shopkeeper from the Netherlands; and thus his mind was so divided that he could not tell what he thought. But he was very curious about Miss Susan's prompt action in the matter, and looked forward with some amusement and interest to hear what she had done, and how she had outwitted the expectant heir.

This idea even beguiled his mind out of the disposi-

tions of general misanthropy with which he had started. He grew eager to know all about it, and anticipated with positive enjoyment the encounter between the old lady, who was the actual Squire, and his companion who was the prospective one. As they neared Whiteladies, too, another change took place in Everard. He had almost been Farrel's partisan when they started, feeling in the mutual gloom, which his companion shared so completely, a bond of union which was very close for the moment. But Everard's gloom dispersed in the excitement of this new object; in short, I believe the rapid movement and change of the air would of themselves have been enough to dispel it—whereas the gloom of the other deepened. And as they flew along the familiar roads, Everard felt the force of all the old ties which attached him to the old house and its inmates, and began to feel reluctant to appear before Miss Susan by the side of her enemy. "If you will go in first I'll see to putting up the horse," he said when they reached the house.

"There is no occasion for putting up the horse," said Farrel; and though Everard invented various other excuses for lingering behind, they were all ineffectual. Farrel, I suppose, had the stronger will of the two, and

he would not relinquish the pleasure of giving a sting to Miss Susan by exhibiting her favourite as his backer. So the young man was forced to follow him, whether he would or not; but it was with a total revolution of sentiment. "I only hope she will outwit the fellow, and make an end of him clean," Everard said to himself.

They were shown into the hall, where Miss Susan chose, for some reason of her own, to give them audience. She appeared in a minute or two in her grey gown, and with a certain air of importance, and shook hands with them.

"What, you here, Everard?" she said with a smile and a cordial greeting. "I did not look for this pleasure. But of course the business is yours as well as Mr. Farrel's." It was very seldom that Miss Susan condescended to add Austin to that less distinguished name.

"I happened—to be—at the Hatch," said Everard faltering.

"Yes, he was with my daughters; and as he was there I made him come with me, because of course he may have the greatest interest," said Mr. Farrel, "as much interest almost as myself——"

"Just the same," said Miss Susan briskly; "more

indeed, because he is young and you are old, cousin Farrel. Sit down there, Everard, and listen; though having a second gentleman to hear what I have to say is alarming, and will make it all the harder upon me."

Saying this, she indicated a seat to Farrel and one to Everard (he did not know if it was with intention that she placed him opposite to the gallery with which he had so many tender associations), and seated herself in the most imposing chair in the room, as in a seat of judgment. There was a considerable tremor about her as she thus for the first time personally announced what she had done; but this did not appear to the men who watched her, one with affectionate interest and a mixture of eagerness and amusement, the other with resolute opposition, dislike, and fear. They thought her as stately and as strong as a rock, informing her adversary thus, almost with a proud indifference, of the way in which her will had vanquished his, and were not the least aware of the flutter of consciousness which sometimes seemed almost to take away her breath.

"I was much surprised, I need not say, by your letter," said Farrel, "surprised to hear you had been at Bruges, as I know you are not given to travelling; and I do not know how to understand the intimation

you send me that my arrangement with our old relative is not to stand. Pardon me, cousin Susan, but I cannot imagine why you should have interfered in the matter, or why you should prefer him to me."

"What has my interference to do with it?" she said, speaking slowly to preserve her composure; though this very expedient of her agitation made her appear more composed. "I had business abroad," she went on with elaborate calm, "and I have always taken a great interest in these Austins. They are excellent people—in their way; but it can scarcely be supposed that I should prefer people in their way to any other. They are not the kind of persons to step into my father's house."

"Ah, you feel that!" said Farrel with an expression of relief.

"Of course I must feel that," said Miss Susan with that fervour of truth which is the most able and successful means of giving credence to a lie; "but what has my preference to do with it? I don't know if they told you, poor old people, that the son they were mourning had left a young widow?—a very important fact."

"Yes, I know it. But what of that?"

"What of that? You ask me so, you a married man with children of your own! It is very unpleasant for

a lady to speak of such matters, especially before a young man like Everard; but of course I cannot shrink from performing my promise. This young widow, who is quite overwhelmed by her loss, is—in short, there is a baby expected. There, now you know the whole."

It was honestly unpleasant to Miss Susan, though she was a very mature and, indeed, old woman, to speak to the men of this, so much had the bloom of maidenhood, that indefinable fragrance of youthfulness which some unwedded people carry to the utmost extremity of old age, lingered in her. Her cheek coloured, her eyes fell; nature came in again to lend an appearance of perfect verity to all she said; and so complicated are our human emotions, that, at the moment, it was in reality this shy hesitation, so natural yet so absurd at her years, and not any consciousness of her guilt, which was uppermost in her mind. She cast down her eyes for the moment, and a sudden colour came to her face; then she looked up again, facing Farrel, who in the trouble of his mind, repeating the words after her, had risen from his seat.

"Yes," she said, "of course you will perceive that in these circumstances they cannot compromise themselves, but must wait the event. It may be a girl, of course,"

Miss Susan added steadily, "as likely as not; and in that case I suppose your bargain stands. We must all" —and here her feelings got the better of her, and she drew a long shivering breath of excitement—"await the event."

With this she turned to Everard, making a hasty movement of her hands and head as if glad to throw off an unpleasing subject. "It is some time since I have seen you," she said. "I am surprised that you should have taken so much interest in this news as to come expressly to hear it; when you had no other motive——"

How glad she was to get rid of a little of her pent-up feelings by this assault!

"I had another motive," said the young man, taken by surprise and somewhat aggrieved as well; "I heard Herbert was better—getting well. I heartily hope it is true."

"You heartily hope it is true? Yes, yes, I believe you do, Everard, I believe you do!" said Miss Susan, melting all of a sudden. She put up her handkerchief to her eyes to dry the tears which belonged to her excitement as much as the irritation. "As for getting well, there are no miracles nowadays, and I don't hope it, though Augustine does, and my poor little Reine does, God help her. No, no, I cannot hope for that; but

better he certainly is—for the moment. They have been able to get him out again, and the doctor says——Stop, I have Reine's letter in my pocket; I will read you what the doctor says."

All this time Farrel-Austin, now bolt upright on the chair which he had resumed after receiving the thunderbolt, sat glooming with his eyes fixed on air and his mind transfixed with this tremendous arrow. He gnawed his under lip, out of which the blood had gone, and clenched his hands furtively, with a secret wish to attack some one, but a consciousness that he could do nothing, which was terrible to him. He never for a moment doubted the truth of the intimation he had just received, but took it as gospel, doubting Miss Susan no more than he doubted the law or any other absolutely certain thing. A righteous person has thus an immense advantage over all false and frivolous people in doing wrong as well as in other things. The man never doubted her. He did not care much for a lie himself, and would perhaps have shrunk from few deceits to secure Whiteladies; but he no more suspected her than he suspected Heaven itself. He sat like one stunned, and gnawed his lip and devoured his heart in sharp disappointment, mortification, and pain.

He did not know what to say or do in this sudden downfall from the security in which he had boasted himself, but sat hearing dully what the other two said, without caring to make out what it was.

As for Miss Susan, she watched him narrowly, holding her breath, though she did nothing to betray her scrutiny. She had expected doubt, questioning, cross-examination; and he said nothing. In her guilty consciousness she could not realise that this man whom she despised and disliked could have faith in her, and watched him stealthily, wondering when he would break out into accusations and blasphemies. She was almost as wretched as he was, sitting there so calmly opposite to him, making conversation for Everard, and wondering, Was it possible he could believe her? Would he go off at once to find out? Would her accomplices stand fast? Her heart beat wildly in her sober bosom, when, feeling herself for the first time in the power of another, she sat and asked herself what was going to happen, and what Farrel-Austin could mean.

END OF VOL. I.

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